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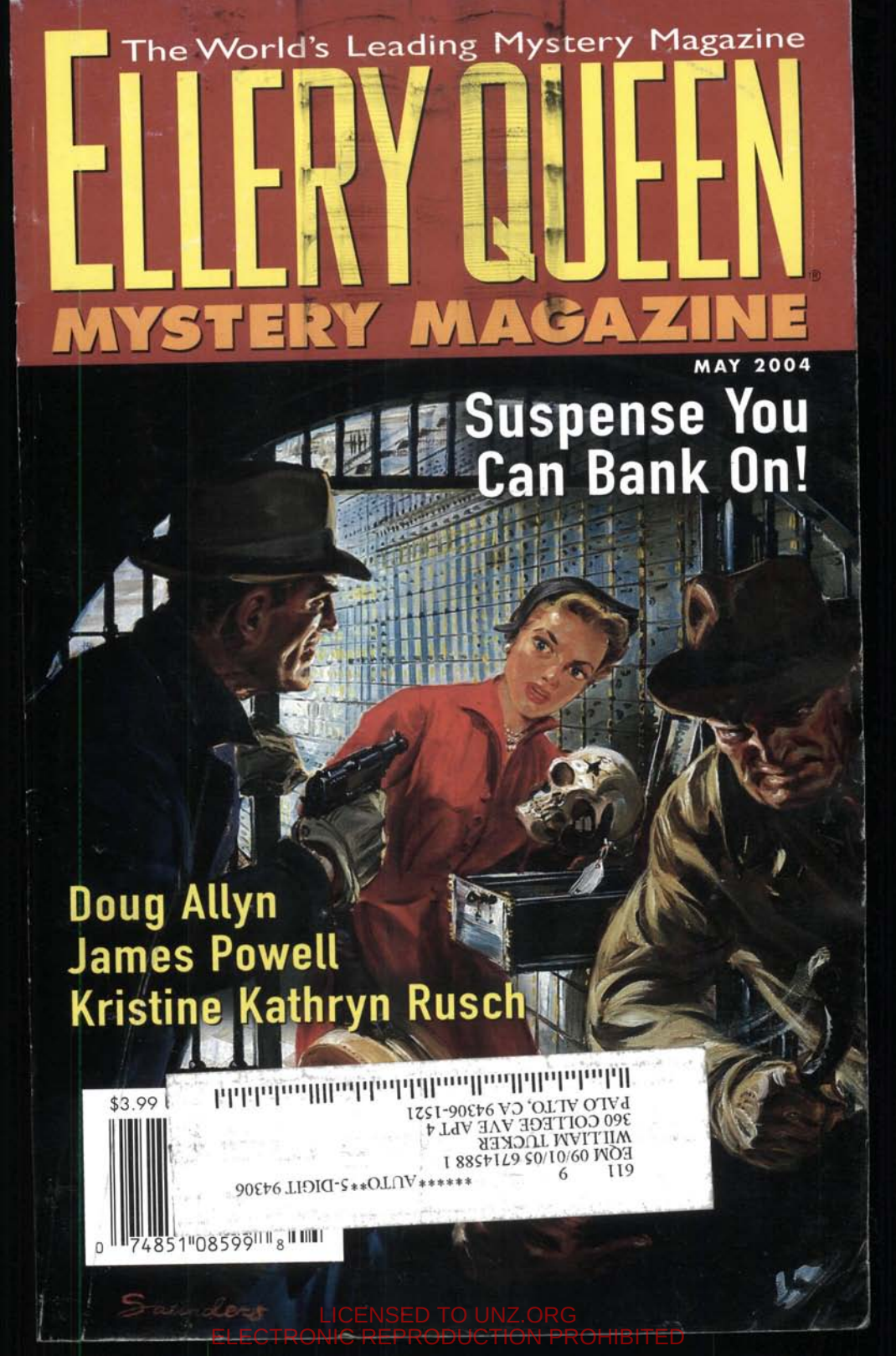

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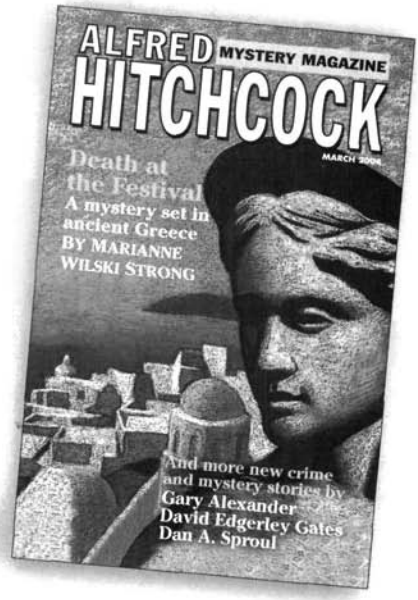

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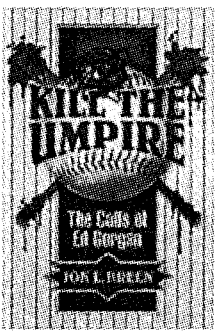

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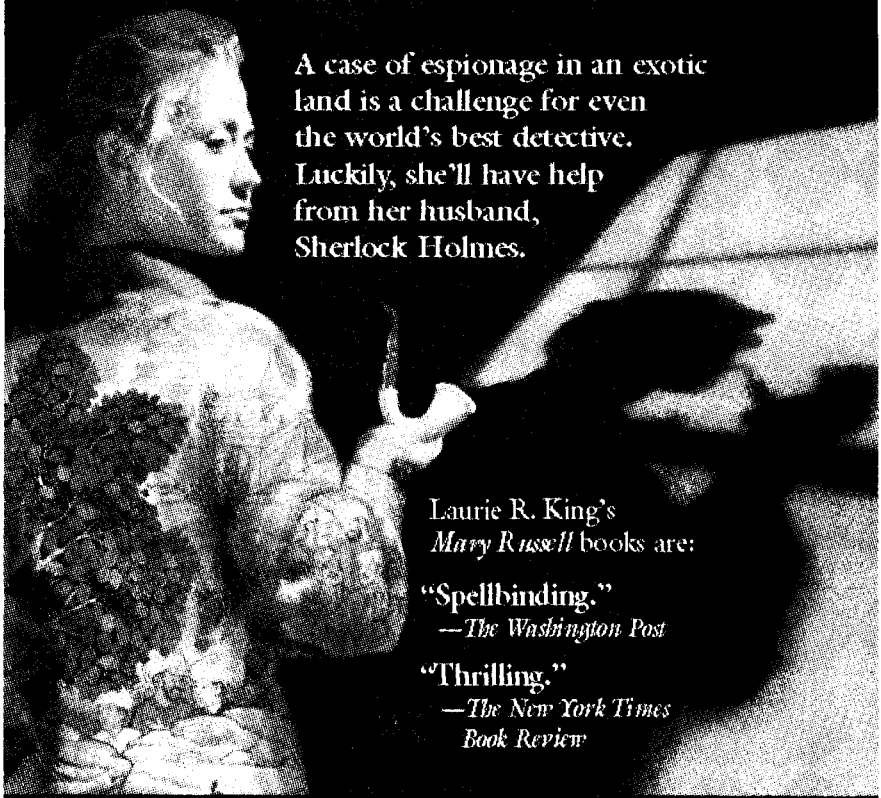

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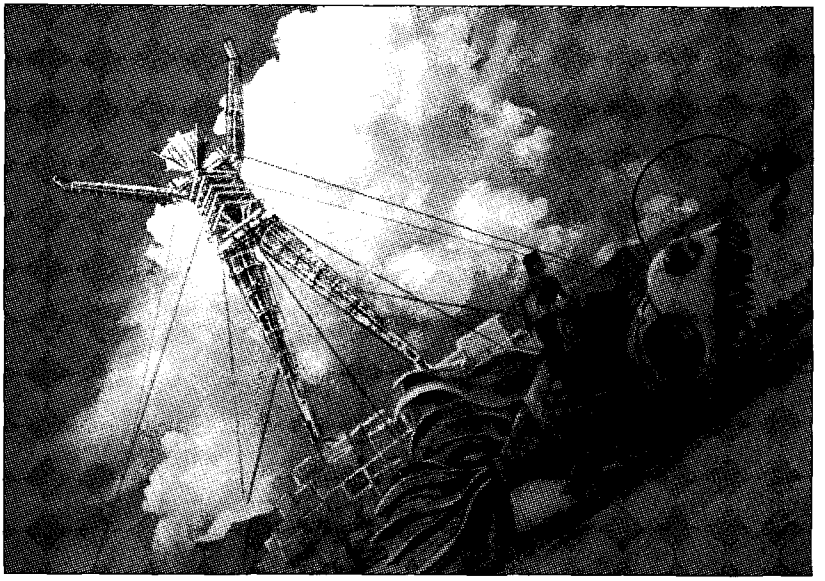

Art by Mark Evans

MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S SCHEME

by Edward D. Hoch

Life doesn't always work out as planned. Juliet Ives and I had made great plans to start our own business after earning our master's degrees at Princeton, but suddenly it was summer and we had nowhere near the capital needed to rent an office, much less furnish it.

It was our career counselor, Professor Blacktree, who suggested a possible solution. Blacktree was a roguish-looking lecturer in English literature who might well have been a pirate in a previous existence. The way Ives tells it, complete with gestures, he leaned across his cluttered desk, knocking a volume of Swinburne's poetry to the floor, and said softly, "I have the perfect summer position for you."

Cutting him off at the pass, so to speak, she quickly replied, "Anything you have in mind would have to include my fiancé,

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Walt Stanton."

Professor Blacktree pondered this for a moment and then said, "Bring him around tomorrow. I'll talk to you both."

So there I was with her in Blacktree's tiny office, being recruited for a job neither of us really wanted. "You may know that my duties here also include fund-raising work with the development office. As with all universities, we have a continuing program to contact alumni, parents, and friends, especially those who might be in a position to add a bequest to the university in their wills. It is a very real and necessary source of income for our endowment and capital needs. Last year we raised nearly thirty-five million dollars, with fifty-nine percent of our undergraduate alumni participating. We employ a full-time staff, of course, and I try to join them on the road myself for a month or two in the summer. Unfortunately, I cannot do so this summer. The development office would be willing to hire both of you for the summer months to contact a few of the older alumni around the country."

The "Burning Man" of this story, and the festival surrounding it, are based on a real yearly event in the Black Rock Desert. It's easy to see how under the cover of such a free-spirited gathering a murder might occur. But few other than author Edward D. Hoch could weave out of this material a satisfying whodunit. The heroes of the piece are Mr. Hoch's new series characters Stanton and Ives, former grad students who take the most unlikely jobs. ✝

It didn't sound like anything either of us wanted to do, tracking down doddering old men just this side of the grave. The university hadn't been fully coed until 1969, so there wouldn't be too many women on our list. Still, jobs weren't that plentiful and it was something we could do together. "This first gentleman is nearby," Blacktree told us. "Down in Cape May. Go see him and then you can decide if you want to try some of the more distant ones."

That seemed reasonable, so we agreed to sit through a few training sessions at the development office. It became clear early on that Blacktree felt Ives's charm could squeeze money out of the most reluctant alums. My presence was mainly for backup, to make sure none of them turned a little frisky in their old age. With the Cape May gentleman, the opposite proved to be true. We drove down to see him a few days after the July Fourth weekend and found him to be a retired lawyer and widower with a charm easily the equal of Ives's. He couldn't take his eyes off her long legs and I had to drag her away once he'd agreed to establish an endowment in memory of his late wife.

Professor Blacktree was so pleased with our first assignment

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that he soon had us driving all over the Northeast. By the time mid August arrived we were experts at the fine art of fund-raising. "I feel as if I've been doing this all my life," Ives told me one night in a motel on Martha's Vineyard.

"Don't get to liking it too much," I advised. "Blacktree says there's only one more after this, out West somewhere."

Professor Blacktree himself had departed on his long-planned leave, and it was left to the director of the development office to tell us about Jed Pinker. "The only address we have for him is Kerslake, Nevada," she said. "It's a pretty remote place, something of a ghost town north of Reno."

"You think he's a likely prospect, living in a ghost town?" Ives asked. She'd become spoiled by the glimpses of the good life we'd encountered in our travels thus far.

"He's contributed to some of our annual campaigns. We think he's worth a personal visit. Here's his card. Jed Pinker, class of 'forty-nine."

Ives groaned. "That would make him—what? Seventy-five?"

The director glanced at her records. "Seventy-six next month."

"Great!"

We flew out to Reno on August 27, a Wednesday. I rented a car and we spent the night in a motel near Paradise Park in Sparks. Kerslake wasn't on any of the maps, but the motel clerk directed us up Route 445 toward Pyramid Lake. "You'll see a turnoff for the National Wild Horse & Burro Placement Center. Keep going another few miles and take the dirt road to your right. There's no sign, but it leads up the hill to Kerslake."

Ives stopped to play a few slot machines in the motel lobby. Then we checked out and followed his directions, with me driving. The temperature was hovering close to ninety and it was still only midmorning. We figured we had to follow the dress code for endowment solicitations, even in a ghost town, so Ives was wearing a demure skirt and blouse while I had on a summer suit with the jacket in the backseat.

The road to Kerslake was as advertised, dirt and dust all the way. When the town finally came into sight it proved to be a collection of wooden shacks, probably built by prospectors who never struck it rich. There was a long-closed general store and even a half-built church, perhaps abandoned when word came that the Lord was taking a different route.

In the entire town there was only one house that could possibly be occupied, a one-story place made of desert adobe with a bold attempt at a front garden. "It's even got curtains on the windows," Ives observed. "A woman's touch." There was a mailbox out front with the name Pinker lettered on it. At one time there'd been

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another name under his, but it had been painted over and obliterated. The mailbox sat on a wooden post, topped by a carving of the official state bird, the mountain bluebird, on a springy wire that moved with the breeze.

There were tire tracks in the driveway, though I saw no vehicle in an open shed that might serve as a carport. I knocked loudly on the door. "Mr. Pinker! Are you home, sir?"

After a moment's silence, Ives suggested I try the knob. "After all, we have the same alma mater."

That sounded reasonable so I tried the knob and it turned. The house was unlocked, just like in all those cheap horror flicks. After that I suppose the body on the living room floor shouldn't have surprised us, but it did.

The dead man had a wound in his chest and another in his forehead, probably from a small-caliber weapon. He was around forty, his brown hair only slightly singed by the wound. He was wearing a T-shirt, khaki shorts, and hiking boots.

"I don't think he's been dead long," Ives said, trying not to look at the body. "In this heat he'd have started decomposing."

"Desert nights can be quite cold," I pointed out, but I suspected she was right. This man, too young to be the Jed Pinker we sought, couldn't have been dead for more than an hour or so. "We'd better call the police."

"What police, Stanton? We're in a ghost town in the Nevada desert."

"They must have state police in Nevada. Let's look around first, make sure Pinker isn't lurking someplace."

He wasn't. The small house was empty except for food, clothing, medical supplies, and an accumulation of other possessions, mainly books on subjects ranging from recreational drugs to Victorian literature. There was no telephone that we could find. A sheet of paper on the kitchen table was the only evidence of Pinker's existence. A large printed circle, marked off with radii every fifteen degrees, bore a small spread-eagled figure at its center with the printed words *Burning Man.* At the bottom of the sheet, handwritten, were the words *Fritz—Gone here. Wheelhouse 285. Jed.*

"What do you make of it?" Ives asked.

"Jed Pinker was expecting someone named Fritz and he left this message telling where he was."

"What is it, a code?"

"Or a street address. Come on, let's get out of here." I folded the paper and stuck it in my pocket.

We left the door unlocked as we'd found it, but before we could make good our getaway another vehicle appeared on the road, coming up behind us. It was a black ATV with some sort of official

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seal and the letters BLM on its door. "Uh-oh!" Ives murmured.

A young woman, attractive and slim, got out of the driver's seat and headed toward us. She was wearing a broad-brimmed ranger's hat and a dark green shirt with shorts. "Hello there!" she called to us just as we reached our car. "Come up to see our ghost town?"

Ives plunged right in. We had no choice. "Thank God! Are you a state trooper?"

The young woman shook her head. "I'm a ranger with the Bureau of Land Management, but maybe I can help. My name's Cathy Riggs."

"We just found a dead man in that house! We were on our way to notify the police."

She followed us back inside, took one look at the body, and said, "I'll report it on my car phone. You two better stay here."

"We were looking for Jed Pinker," I told her. "The door was unlocked and we came in. Is this him?"

"Jed? No, that's not Jed. I don't know who it is. We get a lot of strangers here this time of year."

I showed her our university credentials and explained the reason for our trip, which she seemed to find mildly amusing. "Did you think someone living here, in a ghost town, would have money to contribute to his college back East?"

"Stranger things have happened," Ives insisted. "Look, we don't know anything else about this. Can't we be on our way?"

"To where?" she asked.

That was a good question. I could hardly tell Ranger Riggs that I'd stolen a bit of evidence from the crime scene and would try to follow it to wherever Jed Pinker had gone. "Back to Reno, I guess." I gave her the name of our motel, implying we'd be returning there.

But Ives threw me a curve, as she often did. "Unless you know where the Burning Man is," she added to the ranger.

Cathy Riggs didn't bat an eye. "What you want to go there for? That place is a circus for druggies and perverts. Had my way, I'd shut it down."

"Is it near here?" I asked.

She gave a vague wave of her hand. "Keep going north to Pyramid Lake, then take a right on 446 for a few miles and a left on 447. It's about sixty miles up to Empire. You'll need to buy supplies there."

"What kind of supplies?"

"They'll tell you."

"We're free to go?" Ives asked, just to be sure.

"I've got your names if we need to contact you. I'll call this in on my car phone and wait here for the police."

Out in the car Ives breathed a sigh of relief as I backed around

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the Land Management vehicle. "I'm surprised she let us go. We could have been the killers for all she knew."

"If we didn't look clean-cut and honest, would Professor Blacktree have given us this job in the first place?"

We followed her directions, driving north on Route 447 for the better part of an hour. Empire was a town with a few stores and we stopped at the gas station and lunch counter to ask for further directions. The grizzled attendant came out to look us over. "You goin' to the Burning Man, you gotta have supplies," he told us.

"What besides gas?" I asked.

"Everything! Food, water, clothes, shelter. There's no commercial vending on the site, just a small store for emergencies like coffee and ice. They do run a daily shuttle bus to my store, but I'm pretty much sold out already."

"Exactly what is the place?" Ives wanted to know.

The attendant, whose name was Herb, shrugged. "They call it a temporary alternative-arts community, whatever that means. It's open for a week just before Labor Day, ending on Sunday. I hear tell there's lots of sex and nudity. Never been myself, but I know you gotta be well stocked on provisions. It's boiling by day and frigid by night."

Ives and I exchanged glances. Was this the sort of thing a seventy-five-year-old man would go to? "Do you sell the things we need?" I asked.

"Sure do, if I'm not sold out. Got a general store around back of the station."

We ended up shelling out close to two hundred dollars for food and beverages, though I had no intention of staying till Sunday. Ives insisted we needed some sporty desert wear. "And a tent! We need a tent if it gets that cold at night."

"Who knows if we'll even stay the night? I think you're besotted by that mention of sex and nudity."

"Stanton, you're sounding priggish now."

"There's no chance Jed Pinker would turn up at something like that."

"Maybe he discovered Viagra."

So we bought a little tent and a double sleeping bag and another hundred bucks went on my credit card. "And it's best to bring a portable toilet," Herb told us.

"Isn't there anything there?"

"Nothing but the desert. Most folks take along a bike to help them get around. You can drive to your campsite but after that it's on foot or on bike, unless you've registered your car as a work of art."

Ives looked at our sad dust-covered rental. It hardly qualified as an art car, but we vetoed the bikes. "How do we get to this place?" I

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asked after we'd finished our financial business.

"Three miles up this road you'll come to Gerlach, even smaller than this place. They got gas, too, but not all the supplies we sell. Anyway, from Gerlach you drive one mile to a fork in the road. Take the right-hand fork and drive eleven miles to the Burning Man entrance. It's in the Black Rock Desert."

"Will there be many people there?" Ives asked.

"Only about twenty-five thousand."

That was when we started wondering what we were getting ourselves into. The chances of finding Pinker or anyone else in a crowd that size were just about nil. I took out the sheet of paper he'd left on the kitchen table. "Does this mean anything to you? *Wheelhouse 285?"*

He squinted and pointed at the circle. "This here's a rough outline of the Burning Man site. There's a large outer circle, usually with nine or ten concentric circles within it. Each of these has a name, which functions as a street name for locating people. This 285 refers to a number or location on the Wheelhouse circle."

Ives was impressed. "You know a lot about it for someone who's never been there."

I couldn't help agreeing. Herb was one local not nearly as dumb as he'd let us believe. "What about psychedelic drugs? Do you supply things like Ecstasy, too? LSD? At least a little pot?"

He was squinting again. "The BLM rangers and local police patrol the place off and on. They usually make a few drug busts for the record every year. I can't sell the stuff or they'd be on my tail."

"I guess that's an honest answer."

After a quick bite to eat we changed into casual clothing, figuring that shorts and T-shirts would be more acceptable than our business clothes. Then we were on our way, heading north along a dusty road to nowhere. It was already late in the day and I didn't relish trying to find our way in the dark. "Want me to drive?" Ives asked, but I declined. I knew on a desert road like this she'd have us doing over a hundred in no time. It was best if one of us showed some sense.

When we reached it, we saw a long fence and a sign reading: *Welcome to Black Rock City, Republic of Burning Man.* The entrance was manned by a group of young people in khaki uniforms, with armbands identifying them as Black Rock Rangers. They seemed friendly and fairly normal except for the neon fish on a wire bobbing from the head of one of them. "Admittance at the gate is two-fifty," a young man told us. "Each. That's five hundred for the two of you. Actually, you're just in time. After tonight we stop selling tickets."

We exchanged glances, somehow doubting that the university would approve a five-hundred-dollar charge for admittance to a week-long orgy. "What the hell," Ives decided. "We're here, aren't we? I'll use my credit card."

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"It started Monday," the gatekeeper warned us. "You'll probably have to camp in the last row." He handed over a more detailed map of the Burning Man circle, something called a Survival Guide, and ticket stubs bearing the warning, *You voluntarily assume the risk of serious injury or death by attending.*

"Great!" Ives said. "I'll have to send this home to my folks."

It was still several miles' drive to the circle itself, but we could make it out in the distance. As we drew nearer, a cacophony of music filled the air. Finally we reached the entrance road and started driving down one of the radii leading to the center of the camp. In the distance we could see a giant wooden man, some forty feet tall, with legs spread and arms extended overhead. From all around us came the sights and sounds of a discordant carnival. Suddenly a parade of cyclists cut across our path. There must have been a hundred or more topless women among them, their bodies painted with a variety of colored swirls.

"Hey, Stanton, what have you gotten us into here?"

"Beats me, but it looks like fun."

All around us were makeshift streets lined with tents packed side by side and frequent trailers, some quite elaborate. We came at last to a sign identifying Wheelhouse Avenue and turned down it, searching for number 285. We finally realized it was the number of a street that radiated from the center of the circle, intersecting the various avenues. However, it, like all the other streets in this "city," was crammed with more tents and trailers, some quite a distance from the road.

"She's waving us down," Ives said suddenly, pointing toward a bizarrely dressed young woman holding a flare of some sort. Her black hair had been shaved halfway up her skull and she wore black lipstick, a black bra, and thong panties, with black armbands and a single black stocking that reached halfway up her right thigh.

"Who you looking for?" she yelled to us. "You can't just ride around here on the playa. There are bicycles for that."

"Jed Pinker," I told her. "He's supposed to be near this intersection."

"Yeah, I know Jed. He's over at the Body Painting Guild. See that trailer with the pirate flag on top? Tell him I sent you."

"Right," I said. "What's your name?"

"Lawn. Just tell him Lawn. He'll know. Everyone on the playa knows me."

"*Playa?* Spanish for beach?"

She laughed. "Here it's our fairgrounds, or beach, if you like. No water, though, unless the sprinkler truck comes through."

"You have those, too?" Ives asked.

"Sure, all the comforts of home, except that the water is usually warm."

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At the Body Painting Guild a young woman in a red T-shirt and blue shorts was busy painting multicolored harlequin diamonds on the torso and legs of a naked man. A couple of other clients were dozing on blankets, trying to stay shaded from the blistering desert sun.

"We're looking for Jed Pinker," Ives announced.

"In the trailer," the woman told us without looking up from the task at hand. "I'm Mavis. You want a body job you come to me. Jed's only good for hand jobs."

The naked man found this immensely funny and she had to tell him to hold still. "Cool it, buster! This is delicate work."

The only man in the trailer was a sandy-haired fellow in his mid thirties. "Jed Pinker?" I asked.

"That's me," he said, taking a drag on a joint.

"I guess we're looking for a different Jed Pinker. Maybe your father."

"My father's been dead a long time. Who told you where to find me?"

"Girl named Lawn."

"Lawn, yeah."

The woman who did body jobs poked her head into the trailer. "Ditch the pot, Jed. The BLM's on the prowl."

Sure enough, a familiar vehicle pulled up outside and parked right next to our rental car. It was Ranger Cathy Riggs, big as life. Ives and I went out to meet her. "So you found it okay," she said when she saw us. "Take off your clothes and Mavis here will do you a nice body paint for thirty bucks."

"We just came to find Jed Pinker."

"Same here," Riggs said. "Jed, boy, there's a dead man in your cabin."

He wrinkled his brow as if in concentration. "Anyone I know?"

"The state police have a tentative ID, name of Fritz Holbrook, based on his driver's license. Mean anything to you?"

The name seemed to bring him to his senses, shaking off the drug high that had been taking hold. "I know Fritz. I left him a note that I'd be here. He was supposed to get in last weekend but I didn't hear from him."

"He was shot to death." She'd taken out her notebook. "What's your relationship with Holbrook?"

"We were drinking buddies. He made the run from Frisco to Reno every couple of months and he'd drive up to Kerslake to see me. Usually he stayed over and headed back in the morning."

"What sort of a run was that? Drugs?"

"He wasn't into drugs. He imported native artifacts from Mexico and Latin America. There's a customer in Reno who buys them and resells them to collectors. It's only a couple hundred miles, so he liked to drive it rather than risk shipping the stuff."

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Cathy Riggs made a note. "Removing artifacts from Mexican archaeological sites without a government permit is against the law. They can only be removed from the country on loan, for study purposes, and must be returned."

"Don't tell me, tell Fritz."

"He's dead," she reminded him. "Did he make his delivery to Reno before he came north to Kerslake, or after?"

Jed Pinker shrugged, growing increasingly nervous as the questioning dragged on. "It depended. Usually he stopped in Reno first, unless his contact was tied up that day."

"And you have no idea who killed him?"

"I don't even know who he was selling the stuff to."

Ives was getting tired of the questioning, too. "How does this concern the Bureau of Land Management?" she wanted to know. "His house is private property."

Cathy Riggs closed her notebook. "The BLM is in the process of acquiring the town of Kerslake, as we do many of these Western ghost towns. Mr. Pinker here is the only resident of the place and I've been trying to persuade him to move back to civilization." She started for her vehicle. "I'll want to talk to you again," she told him. "Are you heading back home?"

"Not till after the Burn on Saturday night. That's what I paid for."

She drove away and I told him, "We came out looking for your dad."

"He died about nine years ago and left me that house in Kerslake. It was just what I wanted at this stage of my life. Look, I gotta go. I'll talk to you later."

Outside, it was starting to get dark. "Can we pitch our tent here?" I asked Mavis, since it seemed to be her trailer.

"Sure, right alongside us. Don't turn in yet, though. After dark, when it starts to cool off, is when the fun begins. If you're gonna sleep you'll probably need earplugs."

"Stanton," Ives called from the trailer doorway, "come look at this!"

It was indeed a sight to behold. Lines of men and women wearing white cotton robes with patterns of flames at the bottom paraded along the street. They carried long white poles on their shoulders. A dozen glowing kerosene lanterns hung from each pole, six to a side to balance the load. As we watched, one of the marchers paused to fasten a lantern to the top of a wooden spire at the corner.

"Those are the lamplighters," Mavis explained. "They come at dusk every night. Most of the activity at Burning Man takes place after dark, when it's cooler."

"And that big wooden effigy in the center of the camp is where you hold your human sacrifices?" Ives asked.

Mavis snorted. "Nothing like that. The Burn is Saturday night,

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and it's always quite spectacular, with flames and fireworks. But there's no one inside. Most of the art objects get burned up, too."

"You build this place just to burn it all?"

"It started in San Francisco back in nineteen eighty-six," she told us, warming to her subject. "A Bay Area artist named Larry Harvey built an eight-foot-tall effigy of a man on Baker Beach and set it on fire. The thing became an annual ritual, a midsummer festival for artists."

"It's hardly midsummer anymore," Ives pointed out, a stickler for accuracy.

"That doesn't bother the British. Their Midsummer Day is June twenty-fourth, and that's not too accurate, either. Come to think of it, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* would be the perfect theater piece for us to perform here, much better than the nude opera they tried on Tuesday night."

"How did the event get from Baker Beach to Black Rock?" I asked.

"By nineteen-ninety the crowds were so big they moved it out here for more open space. The size of the crowd, and the Burning Man, just kept growing. Today we get artists and counterculture folks from all over the world. Look around out there. Some of them have flags flying from their tents—Canada, Mexico, Ireland, Sweden, Italy! There's an Israeli flag right across the street. I think there are some Japanese here, too."

The lamplighters were followed by a gigantic painted fish, its jaws open wide, being ridden by a young woman in a bikini and cowboy hat, urging the fish along with her riding crop. I could detect wheels underneath, and the entire art object seemed to be mounted on a vehicle of some sort. "This place is insane," Ives muttered.

"Want to leave?"

"Not with five hundred dollars invested. Besides, Jed Pinker still hasn't told us about his father, the man we came to see."

She was right there, and as one of the lamplighters hung a lantern at the corner of the street I knew we'd be staying in our tent overnight. I could think of worse ways to spend the night.

The partying never stopped and finally we joined in. Wandering around the temporary city, we came upon a tattoo parlor open for business. Lawn, the dark-haired girl with the partly shaved scalp, was inside the lantern-lit tent with a half-naked young man whose chest was covered with samples of his work. She remembered us and introduced us to her friend. "This is Lou, the tattoo man. Best in Black Rock City."

"Really?" Ives was sounding interested. She'd long considered a small tattoo on her ankle.

I motioned toward the humming needle. "You got power here?"

"Some. Our own Department of Public Works lays down a

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trenched power line weeks before we get here. They install the roads, street signs, communication towers, and what few buildings we need. They have cranes and cherry pickers for erecting the Burning Man and some of the other art objects. Sometimes the Burning Man's arms are outstretched, like this year. Other times they're at his side. A generator provides power a few hours a day. You've probably noticed the neon around town."

We had, especially on the Burning Man figure, but I stupidly hadn't connected it with the need for electric power. "What do you think, Stanton?" Ives asked. "A little flower right about here?"

"Let's think it over," I suggested. "Never get a tattoo or a husband without sleeping on it."

"Stanton—"

"We'll get Mavis to paint one on you first and see how you like it."

She finally settled for that and we were on our way. "Stay around and take off your clothes," Lawn urged Ives. "The night air feels great on your skin."

"No, thanks. The last time I was nude in public was when I ran across campus in my freshman year the night of the first snowfall."

Lawn's eyes widened. "Wasn't it cold?"

"We Easterners are a hardy bunch," Ives said in her superior tone of voice.

Finally we went back to our tent. The boisterous night sounds were all around us, everything from poetry readings to campfire conga lines. It was nearly four when we finally fell asleep with our arms around each other.

We awakened before eight to find ourselves in a scene from hell. The temperature had dropped overnight as a fierce dust storm ripped though Black Rock, uprooting tent stakes and filling the air with sand and dirt almost to the point of zero visibility. We heard voices all around us but could see virtually nothing. Mavis stumbled into our tent from her trailer, looking for Jed Pinker. "It's terrible out there," she told us. "Some people who lost their tents are leaving. I have to find Jed."

"We haven't seen him," Ives assured her, pulling on shorts and shirt.

"Do you have sunglasses, dust masks?"

"No masks," I admitted.

She tossed us a couple of molded plastic ones. "Wear these if you go outdoors, or you'll have a lungful of dust in two minutes."

Ives and I finished dressing. "I don't suppose there's any place to take a shower here," she grumbled.

"Lawn mentioned a sprinkler truck. You could run alongside it."

"Yeah. Come on, let's go look for Jed ourselves. We've still got a job to do."

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He wasn't hard to find. While Mavis had gone off after him he'd wandered back to the trailer. "I had to check on the Burning Man," he told us. "It's still standing. This wind is fierce."

"Do you get it every year?" I asked.

"It's happened before. They had a bad blow in two thousand."

"I told you we came looking for your dad," I said. "The university alumni association had no record of his death."

"He wasn't in touch with them, as far as I know. He was never one to talk about the good old days at college."

"Still, we wonder if you've given any thought to making a donation in his honor."

Pinker laughed at that. "Not too likely. I went to UCLA myself, but they tossed me out after two years. And don't look to me for my father's money. It all melted away in the stock market."

He adjusted his dust mask and sunglasses and stepped back outside the trailer. We were about to follow him when another figure appeared out of a cloud of blowing dust. It was a woman, nude except for bikini bottoms and sneakers, a dust mask and dark glasses over her face and a scarf around her hair. A small leather pouch hung from her right shoulder.

I was trying to decide if it was anyone I knew when her hand went into the pouch and came out holding a small automatic pistol. Without a word she aimed it at Pinker and shot him twice, in the head and chest. Then she dropped the pistol and ran.

I was after her in a flash, but without my mask and glasses in place I had to stop the chase after a few feet, blinded by the stinging sand and dust. "Stanton!" Ives yelled after me. "Are you all right?"

"I am, but Pinker's not. I think he's dead."

I don't know if it was the first murder committed at a Burning Man festival, but it certainly must have been the most spectacular. As Friday's winds gradually died down, the place filled with police. First it was the festival's own Black Rock Rangers, unarmed, of course, spreading the word and trying to calm everyone, preparing them to accept the momentary arrival of the local authorities and the state cops, whose criminal investigation unit photographed the scene and questioned everyone who'd been in the neighborhood, especially me. The murder weapon was recovered where the killer had dropped it, but there were no fingerprints. Apparently she'd been wearing latex gloves, which I hadn't noticed in the storm. Before long Cathy Riggs and another of the BLM rangers arrived for their share of the investigation.

"They tell me you saw it all," she confronted me. "What'd she look like?"

"I can give you a great description of her breasts but not much else."

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Ives jabbed me with her elbow. "She was female, that's all we can say for sure."

Riggs shook her head. "Narrows it down to half the twenty-five thousand people in attendance."

Mavis spoke up from the sidelines. "We always get a small number of cross-dressers, too. No one worries much about gender at Black Rock."

"Did anyone leave here after the killing?"

Lou the tattoo expert had come along with Lawn and he answered that one. "The windstorm drove some people away. I was helping out the Black Rock Rangers in the emergency and I saw at least a dozen vans and trailers pulling out. The killer could have been with them."

By afternoon the Black Rock DPW had completed its cleanup of storm damage and things were getting back to normal. "Thought any more about that tattoo?" Lou asked Ives.

"Not with all that's happened this morning. Your cleanup guys do a great job."

"We have to. There's seven square miles of this place to cover. Our motto is *Leave No Trace.* If we didn't abide by it, we probably wouldn't be able to come back next year."

Jed Pinker had been shot with the same small-caliber weapon as Holbrook. It would be a day or two before they had the ballistics results, but Cathy Riggs seemed convinced it had been the same killer. The state police had their crime-scene photographs from Holbrook's murder the previous day and she rounded up a number of people who'd been camped nearby to see if any of them recognized the first victim. Mavis and Lou and Lawn all said no. They hadn't seen him with Pinker, a regular at Burning Man, and doubted if he'd ever attended the event.

I took a look at the pictures myself, starting with the exterior of Pinker's house. There was the post in front, with the carving of the mountain bluebird hovering above it. The body on the living room floor was as we'd seen it. However, Ives noticed something I hadn't spotted before. "Look at this." She was pointing to a small wooden or plastic fish on a wire over a lamp. "It's like the ranger at the gate was wearing on his cap."

"And like the bluebird in front of the house. I'll bet somebody here makes and sells these."

It was Mavis who had the answer to that, when we had a chance to ask her. "Sure, it's Wendy Sunshine. She's up front, near the Burning Man, in a theme camp called Wendy Sunshine's Forgotten Supplies. She sells everything from tent pegs to sunglasses, and she makes these as a hobby. Jed Pinker probably bought them last year."

We hadn't planned to stay over another night, but there was a chance Wendy might know something about Pinker's killing. "This

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isn't raising money for Professor Blacktree," Ives reminded me.

"Perhaps Pinker's estate—"

"He told us his father's money was all gone in the stock market. I wonder what he was living on."

"Nothing much in Kerslake. Maybe he was panning for gold."

"No water, Stanton. You need running water to pan for gold."

Ives refused to rent a bicycle, so later on Friday, when the police had cleared out, we walked over to the Center Camp facing the Burning Man and found Wendy Sunshine's Forgotten Supplies right next to a place offering yoga lessons. Wendy herself was a jovial girl barely out of her teens. A couple of college-boy types were helping her restock the shelves of her tiny emporium. "About now is when I really get busy," she told us, flouncing her head to show off the fat bumblebee attached to a spring. "Everyone thinks they brought enough supplies and by Friday they start running short."

"We saw some of your baubles at Jed Pinker's house," Ives said. "They're cute."

"Sell you the bee for ten dollars," she said, unclipping it from her hair. "It's the last one left."

"Did you know Jed well?" I asked.

"Well enough to shed a tear over his murder, I guess. He was a neat guy."

"No enemies?"

"Everyone has enemies. I was the most popular girl in my high school class and some girls hated me just because of that. Go figure."

I looked out the entrance to her shop. "You'll have a great view of the Burn from here."

"Come down tomorrow night and I'll give you a ringside seat."

"I don't know if we'll stay that long."

"You gotta stay!" she insisted, grabbing me by the arms. "You never saw anything like it. When he starts to burn there's a smoke alarm in his crotch that goes off. And fireworks shoot out of his arms and legs."

"We'll think about it," Ives promised, handing her ten dollars for the bee.

I picked up an extra gallon of water while we were there and we headed back to the street, careful to avoid a fire-breathing mechanical dragon that crossed our path. "What did we accomplish there?" Ives wanted to know, almost shouting above the din of music that was everywhere.

"Well, you got a bee and I tried to imagine what she looks like naked."

Ives snorted. "Maybe I can arrange for all the women in Black Rock to parade past you topless so you can identify the killer."

"Not a bad idea."

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So we ended up staying over Friday night, and by Saturday morning it was obvious we'd still be around for the Burn. There was a heightened sense of excitement in Black Rock City, and we even discovered a small airstrip where private planes were arriving for the big event.

"They fly in the last day for some fireworks and miss all this free love?" Ives observed, unable to comprehend it.

"Maybe they're older. Maybe they get off on fireworks and Burning Men." All over Black Rock City the revelers were having their body paint touched up, their hair braided with ribbons. The killing of Jed Pinker was all but forgotten. Everyone seemed to have a camera, their last chance to pose under the Burning Man. Ives watched a car drive by with a portable bar mounted on its side, ready to quench your thirst for a price.

"I just thought of something," she said.

"What's that?"

"What happened to Fritz Holbrook's car? He didn't walk up to Pinker's house in Kerslake."

"Pinker must have driven him up."

"No, because then he wouldn't have needed to leave a note on his whereabouts."

"The killer took his car, then."

"Then what happened to the killer's car?"

"Do you think Pinker killed his friend and made up the note to throw the police off the trail?"

She rejected that idea, too. "It's pretty obvious Holbrook and Pinker were killed by the same person. Both were shot in the head and chest with a small-caliber weapon. Besides, Pinker had no way of knowing we or anyone else would find the body while he was gone. If we hadn't come by, Holbrook would still be rotting away on the living room floor. No, there's only one possibility. Holbrook came there with his killer, either in his own car or the killer's."

I had to admit she was right. And there was something else bothering me about that first murder, something that had stirred in my brain when I examined those crime-scene photos from Kerslake. But I couldn't quite grasp it.

The early evening was filled with more surrealistic events, mainly centered around the symbol of the Burning Man, now surrounded with bails of hay to feed the flames. Ives and I finished the last of our meager food, so there was no doubt we'd be leaving in the morning or sooner. Lawn came by with her friend Lou and said, "I hope you've got enough gasoline. The lines at the stations in Gerlach and Empire are horrible on Sunday morning!"

"I think we'll manage," Ives told her.

"What about that tattoo?" Lou asked.

"Still thinking about it."

At sundown Cathy Riggs pulled up in her BLM vehicle. "You're

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still here," she said when she saw us.

"Might as well wait for the Burn," I told her. By night the wooden man's neon ribs and extremities glowed even brighter. Somehow it was a thing of beauty and I hated to think of it and the other art objects going up in flames.

"There's a little cafe at center camp. Can I buy you two a latte?"

"Sure," Ives said. "We're just about out of everything we brought."

"Folks always run short." She bought three lattes at the cafe with a ten-dollar bill and we sat on a blanket drinking them.

"When do they start the fire?" I asked.

"Soon now. It's almost dark enough."

Mavis came by on her bicycle, lugging a knapsack of painting supplies. "How about it, Miss Ives? Shuck off the clothes and I'll make you look like a rose garden."

"Best offer I've had all week, but no thanks. I'd never be able to explain it back in New Jersey."

The night grew darker, until the Burning Man's neon tubes were the main source of illumination. I saw the giant fish returning on its hidden wheels, and recognized the young woman on top as Wendy Sunshine. Her crew detached the fish from the Jeep underneath and carried it to the Burning Man's feet like some sort of sacrifice. Cathy Riggs joined the other spectators in a round of applause.

"Too bad Jed isn't here to see this," Mavis said. "He told me once that the Burn was the high point of his year."

"Did he ever have a woman?" Ives asked.

"I don't know. He never talked much about his personal life."

I knew Ives was remembering those curtains on his windows—a woman's touch, she'd called it. And then there was the painted-out name on the mailbox.

The mailbox.

"They're lighting the fire," Riggs said.

"The mailbox!" I almost shouted. "The mailbox was missing from the post in the photo of Pinker's house!"

A deafening cheer rose from the crowd as a stunt man in a flaming costume ran directly into the bails of hay. A tongue of fire shot up as the smoke alarm in the Burning Man's crotch blared out a useless warning.

"Is that guy all right?" Ives asked.

"He's done it before. By now he's quite skilled at it." This was from Mavis. Now the flames were engulfing the entire construction. Neon tubes were shattering, yielding their glow to the sparkle of the flames. Fireworks began shooting out of the figure on all sides.

Every eye was on the burn, all except Cathy Riggs's. Her eyes were on me. "What about the mailbox?" she asked above the roar.

"The killer had to take it because her name was on it along with Pinker's. He'd painted it out, but she knew a forensic lab would be

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able to read it. The box was there when Ives and I left, and gone when the police arrived to take their pictures. Only you were on the scene during that time, Ranger Riggs. You told us you'd wait for the police."

"Are you saying I killed Holbrook?"

"You hooked up with him in Reno, pretending you were still living with Pinker, and drove him to Kerslake. He was bringing some illegal Mexican artifacts for Pinker, and that's what you killed him for. You guessed Pinker would be here at Burning Man all week and his note on the kitchen table confirmed it. But after you left the body and took off with the artifacts, you remembered the mailbox with your name painted out. You came back for it and found Ives and me with the body."

The Burning Man was leaning now, shooting off more of its fireworks. I could barely hear Riggs's voice over the crowd and the music. "And I killed Pinker, too?"

"Of course. You found us among all these people because you read the note he'd left on the kitchen table. It was in my pocket by the time you returned to the house so you must have seen it earlier, when you shot Holbrook. Pinker knew immediately that you were the killer. On Friday morning you took advantage of the windstorm and the fact that your ranger vehicle could pass in and out of the gate on regular patrols. Your scheme was a simple if bizarre one. In this place where clothing is optional, you stripped off your uniform, donned a dust mask, dark glasses, and a headscarf, and became one of the revelers—just long enough to shoot Pinker and make your escape. So long as you were careful not to leave fingerprints on the gun, you were home free."

"You think you can prove that?" Her face was no longer pleasant.

"I just have. If the state police need more proof, I'll bet those Mexican artifacts are still hidden in your ATV."

She shook her head and started to rise. For a moment I didn't know what she would do. Then I realized she was making a run for it. "Ives! Stop her!"

With thousands of people crowded around the circle, blocking her escape, she cut across the open center, running too close to the Burning Man in its final seconds. When it came down, all forty feet of blazing inferno, firing off the last of its rockets, it caught her in its downward spiral. Over the deafening roar, we never heard her scream.

"What are we going to tell Professor Blacktree?" Ives wondered as we boarded the plane in Reno on Monday.

"Well, we could tell him we solved a double murder, and recovered some stolen Mexican artifacts, and corrected the alumni records. But to keep it simple let's just tell him we quit." ●

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Good Neighbor Farber

by Gordon Cotler

No matter how grim the weather or how black his workday promised to be, Farber's morning could be measurably brightened when his apartment-house elevator door opened to receive him. About twice a month—more, when his luck was running — The Woman With Violet Eyes would be in the car. She could be counted on to greet him with a musical "Good morning" and a radiant smile that lit the shaft from roof to basement. Farber couldn't remember her name although his wife had told it to him half a dozen times (Farber kept nothing from his wife), so she remained The Woman With Violet Eyes.

Gordon Cotler's varied literary career includes credits in musical theater and the movies as well as in novel and short-story writing. For instance, in 1968, under the pseudonym Alex Gordon, he wrote the final book for the Broadway musical *Here's Where I Belong,* based on the Steinbeck novel *East of Eden,* and in 1979 he wrote the script for the movie *Sanctuary of Fear.* For the past several years, Mr. Cotler has been producing these splendid "Farber" short stories. ¶

"She's not the spring chicken you're fantasizing," Sylvie had said just this morning over the last of the coffee. "She has a daughter away at college."

"You've got two daughters *out* of college," Farber said. He shot her an admiring glance. "I rest my case."

Sylvie let the compliment pass. She said, "What makes her so alluring, Bernie, is that she's divorced."

"She's divorced? How do you know?"

"You live in the building, you know things. By the way, her name is Rita Benjamin."

"Right," said Farber, instantly forgetting it. She remained The Woman With Violet Eyes.

And just as though this breakfast-table exchange had carried a signal upward through the building, five minutes later the opening elevator door revealed her in the flesh.

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Alone in the car, a rare occurrence.

If no one else boarded between here and the lobby, they would have five floors of a kind of enforced intimacy. Forty-something years old, Farber felt a slight reddening of his ears.

He got the smile, all right, but it fell short of radiance. And if the "Good morning" was musical it was music in a minor key. She looked worn. She had not slept well. Her hair lacked its usual springiness. Farber almost forgot his answering "Good morning." And he abandoned a budding plan to open a conversation based on a promising weather picture. She was not up to it today.

No one else buzzed for the car, and the ride to the lobby in silence seemed without end. After the initial mandatory eye contact, Farber's traveling companion never looked his way again. She was off in some distant, troubling place. And yes, Farber admitted, this morning she might very well be forty.

When the car door finally rattled open he felt relieved. He stood aside for her to get out.

"Thank you." She shook her head. "I'm going to the basement."

"Well, then, have a good day," said the witty Lieutenant Farber as he left the elevator. Transcripts of the exchange would be available for $9.99.

Tenants visited the basement for only one reason—to add to or subtract from the bin each apartment was allotted for storage. Violet wasn't carrying anything, so she must be picking something up. To take to her office rather than back up to her apartment or she wouldn't be wearing her hat and coat.

These detectivelike musings ended when Farber left the lobby and reached the street corner. The Woman With Violet Eyes was emerging from the basement steps, about fifty feet along the side of the building. She hurried swiftly up the street, away from him.

There hadn't been time for her to visit her bin, or even to look for the super. You'd think she was ducking a process server. Farber turned back toward the building's front door. But there was no one loitering near the entrance or anywhere else along the block. Here was a very small mystery that would probably never be explained. Farber's bus had pulled up and he hopped aboard.

And then, a few days later, he spotted someone who might very well be his neighbor's nemesis. The man wasn't loitering on the sidewalk but in the front seat of a late-model Toyota double-parked a few yards back from the building's entrance. Double-parkers were not unusual in the morning—by law, alternate sides of the street had to be kept clear for trash collection—but this one called attention to himself by slouching guiltily behind the wheel and shooting furtive glances toward the building entrance. He met Farber's eyes and turned away.

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Farber approached the open car window and leaned in. "Can I help you?"

"Who the hell are you?" the man asked. He had heavy sideburns and a formidable moustache out of a Civil War photograph.

Farber had reached for his ID folder. Now he flipped it open and let the morning sun bounce off the gold shield into Hairy Harry's deep-set eyes. He said, "You don't have to sit in your car until it's legal to park across the street. See these other double-parks? The owners leave a note on the dash where they can be reached."

"I'm not parking, Constable." Pause. "Fact is, I was just leaving." He switched on his motor.

"Have a nice day," Farber said, and watched him pull out.

"I think she's got a stalker," he said at dinner that night.

"Who?" Sylvie asked.

"You know, that Woman With Violet Eyes."

"Rita Benjamin."

"Right. A plug-ugly if ever I saw one and I've seen my share. A real turnoff." Actually, he had already decided the man was good-looking in a vaguely dangerous way that some women find sexy. "He was skulking out front, itching to make trouble."

"That must be what she wants to see you about."

"She wants to see me . . . ?"

"She knows you're a police officer and—"

Farber broke in. "How does she know that?"

"I told you, you live in the building, you know things. I was going to tell you after dinner." Pause. "So as not to impede your digestion. We agreed that she'd stop by at eight-fifteen tomorrow morning. It's my early day, I'll be gone."

"You're going to leave me alone with her?"

Confidently, "Help yourself."

She showed up at eight-fifteen exactly and succeeded in lighting up the apartment, but dimly; she still wasn't her old self. He led her into the living room and indicated the couch. He sat in his reading chair. En route she had said, "I'm sorry to bother you, Lieutenant Farber, but your wife—she's so lovely—said it would be all right. This is an imposition, I know. And an embarrassment for me to have to talk about it."

When they were settled he said, "Somebody's following you. A man with a heavy moustache and sideburns. Who is he and why?" No use dancing around the point.

"Then you've seen him." She was not surprised. "My husband. It's been a nightmare. He shows up everywhere. Here, at my office building, places I have lunch, my gym. The other night—it was after eleven—I came out of a building nearby where I play bridge once a

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week. He was waiting under a streetlight. He followed me home. Never more than ten feet behind. Can you imagine? It was awful."

"Does he say anything? Threaten you?"

"Nothing. He says nothing. He just *stares.* It's ungodly creepy."

"How long has this been going on?"

"Over a month. We're separated nearly two years—since just before I moved into this building. He's been out of the country most of that time, thank God. 'Finding himself,' my daughter says. A manager ran his business. He asked me to take him back. I said absolutely not."

It was none of Farber's business but he said, "Because . . . ?"

"He hit me. I said if he ever did it again I'd leave him. He did it again."

The bastard. "What he's doing now sounds like a kind of stalking. Not the traditional ex-husband stalking—they usually shout abuse or try something physical. But his presence alone is threatening. You can probably get a court order requiring him to keep a certain distance between you."

"I can't go to court. My daughter would never forgive me. I don't even have a divorce."

"Why did you come to me? Didn't Sylvie tell you I'm a homicide detective?"

"I thought maybe you could talk to him. Informally. Off the record. Scare him into stopping what he's doing."

"Look, Mrs. . . . ah . . ."

"Rita."

"Rita." A moment to savor the name. "Rita, stalkers are determined people. Not easily dissuaded. I don't see how I can make a difference."

She was staring at him intently. The wattage in the violet eyes had increased. "Please," she said.

Farber heard himself say, "I'll see what I can do."

"Why don't you stop stalking your wife?" wasn't likely to bring results, Farber knew. Something grabbier was needed, which is why a couple of noontimes later he was occupying a counter stool at Bella's, the greasy spoon nearest to Gus Benjamin's business, Planet Glass, located in the auto-repair district in the far West Fifties. Small risk: There wasn't another place to grab a bite for three blocks around, but if Benjamin didn't eat here Farber would at least have had lunch.

His guess had turned out to be a sound one. He was barely into his Western omelet when Benjamin ambled in, dressed in mismatched jacket and pants and a collarless shirt. He was bigger than he had appeared seated in his car, with broad shoulders and an ironing-board stomach. He took exactly the seat Farber hoped

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he would, around the corner from Farber at the L-shaped counter. He said, "The usual, Iris," to the waitress as she pushed a set-up toward him and slammed down a glass of water. Then he looked around, because he had nothing better to do.

Farber came briefly into his line of sight and out of it. Then, after a minute of staring at the pastry display while he figured out what exactly he had seen that bothered him, he looked at Farber again. This time he placed him and the Battle of Bull Run moustache twitched. Farber returned his stare, his face a mask, and resumed working on the omelet.

And that's the way it went for the next fifteen minutes—a furtive glance from Benjamin, a nonjudgmental return look from Farber, then back to their lunches. Farber was finished with his omelet well ahead of the other man with his bacon cheeseburger, but he lingered over his coffee and he left Bella's not much more than a dozen paces behind Gus. Which is the way they walked up the street, pretty much in lockstep.

Practically every business along here had to do with car servicing—body work, engine repairs, tire replacement, and so on. Workers spilled from the open bays into the street, along with the cars they were working on. Planet Glass, Farber had learned from Rita (he lingered over that name), replaced auto glass—chipped or cracked windshields and side windows broken by thieves. Farber knew this to be a good business, since most comprehensive auto policies paid in full for glass replacement and the problem was a chronic one in New York. And, in fact, four or five overalled Planet Glass bruisers were scrambling to make whole as many cars, vacuuming up shards of broken safety glass, removing door panels, gluing new windshields in place. Every inch of the shop was in use, as well as the adjacent sidewalk, where two more cars waited for attention. A very good business.

Gus Benjamin was either unaware he was being followed or, more likely, he chose to ignore his tail. He entered his establishment without ever turning back, and made straight for the glass-walled office at the rear. Farber planted himself on the sidewalk where he had a clear view of the entire shop. He leaned against a car hood as though he was prepared to spend the afternoon learning the fascinating craft of auto-glass replacement. He had, in fact, checked his office from the diner by cell phone. He hadn't been missed, so he was prepared to give this enterprise another fifteen minutes.

It took only three or four to bring results. After flipping through some paperwork, Benjamin walked out into the shop to check on his crew. He spotted Farber almost immediately. His heavy eyebrows touched for an instant and then he spun on his heel and started back toward the office. Before he reached it, he stopped to

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consider his options. Then he turned again and headed resolutely for Farber, ignoring a call by a beefy worker to check out a problem.

Benjamin didn't believe in backing into a subject. "I know you," he snapped. "The cop from the other day. What is this? Somebody think I'm running an insurance scam?"

That hadn't occurred to Farber but it was not a stretch. Insurance claims under a hundred dollars are hardly worth the company's bother to check and Planet Glass might well be fattening its weekly take with a few fake claims. Farber assumed a knowing look. "You tell me," he said.

"I'll damn well tell you. I run a clean operation. So why don't you back off?"

"From what? I'm standing on a public sidewalk." Pause. "Which you're blocking with illegally parked cars."

"Is that what this is? A parking beef? I don't think so. You're hassling me, Constable. Like the other morning near . . . uh, that apartment house."

"The one where your wife lives?"

Benjamin's brows shot up. "Rita? Rita lives there?"

"You had no idea."

"None." Still wide-eyed, "I was waiting for a friend who never showed. So that's it, huh?" A faint look of pleasure washed across his face. "So Rita went hollering to the cops I'm bothering her."

"No way you are, right?"

"Damn right. What's over is over. Oh sure, I ran into her a few times when I happened to hit the neighborhood where she works. My dentist is somewhere down around there. But bugging her? No way. Rita's a nervous woman." He raised a hand to ward off objections. "Good-looking, sure. Easy on the eyes, definitely." He swallowed hard. "So when I do run into her it causes me no pain." Insistently, "But she's a very nervous woman."

"Maybe she's nervous because she runs into you here, there, everywhere. Look at you, Gus, you're acting nervous after running into me only twice."

"Who's nervous? What I am, Constable, is busy. I've got a business to run. So if you're not going to arrest me for going to the dentist . . ." He paused confidently, and when the other man didn't respond he turned and started back into the shop. Over his shoulder he called, "Tell her not to be so nervous. If she's happy with her life she shouldn't be nervous."

Three minutes later Farber took off for his office.

"You still working on that problem of Mrs. Benjamin's?" Sylvie asked a few nights later. She and Bernie had just settled down in the living room for a pre-dinner martini mixed by the master.

"I'm trying to help the woman, yes," Farber said. He would have

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preferred the subject hadn't come up. "An hour here, half an hour there. I think I can do her some good."

Sylvie was toying with her glass. "So who's supervising the new homicide cases on the Upper West Side?"

"There haven't been any. That's why I'm able to squeeze in a little *pro bono* work."

"Maybe the would-be murderers in the area are holding off until you get rid of Mrs. Benjamin's stalker."

Farber sidestepped the barb. "I think I *am* getting close to discouraging him."

"Tell me."

"Why not?" Since there would be no escaping Sylvie's bulldog curiosity, Farber opened up with relish. "One afternoon around quitting time I spotted Benjamin hanging out in the lobby of his wife's office building. When he saw me he shot through the revolving door so fast he gave the next half-dozen users a free spin. He was not happy to see me. And then yesterday, in a little health-food restaurant where Rita eats lunch two or three times a week—"

"So you remember her name."

"Rita? What's so hard about that name?" He was tone-deaf to her teasing. "Anyway, the day I went in the place she didn't show, but Gus Benjamin was at the counter choking down a vegetable plate."

Sylvie set her glass on the coffee table and nodded her understanding. "Hoping to show her how compatible they are," she murmured. "The poor guy must really care for the woman."

"What, you give him a gold star for effort?" Farber said. "Better he gets off her back. Anyway, as soon as he saw me he pushed the plate away, slammed down some bills, and made for the exit. As he passed me I said, 'Late for the dentist, Gus?' He said, 'What if I am?' I had time for one more shot while he opened the door. I said, 'Raw veggies must be hell on weak teeth.' I think I'm getting to him. I think he's ready to give it up."

"Lucky Rita. Her taxpayer dollars at work."

Early one evening no more than a week later, Sylvie called her husband to the phone. Eyes dancing with amusement, she said, "It's for you."

"Who?" Bernie mouthed.

Her eyes now rolling ceilingward, Sylvie took on a beatific look. Annoyed, Farber snatched the phone. "Good evening, Mrs. Benjamin," he said.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Lieutenant. Am I interrupting dinner or something?"

"Not at all," he said, applying his napkin to the corner of his mouth. He wanted to say, "And please, it's Bernie," but decided that discretion was much the safer path. "Is everything all right?"

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"It certainly is. That's why I'm calling." Her voice was even more musical, if that was possible, than in her best days in the elevator. "He's stopped. Totally. I haven't seen so much as his shadow in ten days. What a relief. I just wanted to thank you."

"No problem. Any time. I was glad to be of help." So this was the end of their mini-relationship. "So . . . I'll see you in the elevator," he said.

"Excuse me?" she said, and then, "Oh yes, of course. Good night."

Of course. The elevator was an event only for him.

"Bernie," Sylvie called from the table, "before your dinner gets cold . . ."

As if by agreement, murder returned to the Upper West Side the very next day. A teenager killed a bodega owner on Amsterdam Avenue during a botched robbery attempt. It was an unsurprising tragedy, but a homicide team took well into the evening to hunt down the youth at his grandmother's house. No surprises there, either. No matter how alienated they were, they usually crawled back to family when they were in serious trouble. A methodical interrogation of the killer confirmed that he had no accomplices. But it was a long day and by the time Farber was able to head for home, eleven o'clock had come and gone.

When he got off the bus at his corner, his eye was drawn along the cross street to his building's basement entrance. A police car was parked at the curb, its light bar flashing, and even at this late hour a small crowd had collected. Farber hurried to join it.

Rita Benjamin stood in the center of the knot, head bent, both hands holding fast to a policeman's arm as though to steady herself. The young cop looked ill at ease, at a loss how to comfort her. Farber flashed him his ID and said, "You all right, Mrs. Benjamin?"

Rita looked up, relieved to see a familiar face. "Lieutenant Farber," she said. Her violet eyes were misty with tears. "It was awful, just awful," she said, her voice trembling. "I can't tell you. . . ." She clutched the officer's sleeve even more fiercely.

"I think you need to get off your feet," Farber said, and took hold of an elbow. "To cool off." He shot the cop a "Let me handle this" look and led her to the police car and eased her into the backseat. He said, "Why don't you take a few deep breaths? That sometimes helps." He left the door open and turned to the cop, his face a question.

"The lady was walking home from a bridge game on the next block when she was assaulted," the cop said. "A man tried to drag her down those cellar stairs—"

"Lucky you came by."

"No, the perp was gone by the time we arrived. If this gentleman

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hadn't heard the lady scream . . ." He pointed into the crowd with a stubby finger and there stood Gus Benjamin.

Benjamin shrugged shyly. "Anybody in my shoes would have done the same thing."

Rita, pretty much composed now, leaned out of the car. "I was terrified," she said. "That . . . that beast . . ."

"We have a description, Lieutenant," the cop said. "My partner is out with a couple of units scouring the area." He made a gesture indicating that he didn't hold out much hope.

Rita felt compelled to finish her account. "That beast grabbed me around the neck and twisted my arm," she said. "He wouldn't let go." She wanted Farber to know she wasn't a wimp. "I kicked as hard as I could and stamped on his foot but he was just too strong. I've never been so scared. I felt helpless. And suddenly, out of nowhere, Gus was all over him punching and kicking and the two of them were rolling on the sidewalk. And then that creep was on his feet running for his life. Thank God Gus was there."

Gus Benjamin managed another shrug. "It's just luck that I happened to be in the neighborhood," he said.

"Oh, Lieutenant Farber! I'm glad I ran into you," Rita Benjamin said. "I was going to call you tonight."

It was six P.M. of an evening a week later and Farber had entered the lobby and found her waiting for the elevator. She hadn't been in touch since the incident at the cellar stairs and he hadn't seen either of the Benjamins. He had figured no news was good news and she did look good. She looked very good. "Hi, what's up?" he said.

"I wanted you to know that you may see Gus here in the building and I didn't want you to think he's following me. We've been talking." She looked away with the excuse of having to press the call button again. "You're going to think I'm crazy, but he's moving in with me."

Farber took a moment to frame an appropriate reply. "Why?" was the best he could manage. After a moment he added, "It almost never works. What he did to you, the odds are he'll do it again."

"Don't you think I've considered that? Maybe I *am* crazy, but I'm going to take the chance." She had prepared what she would say to Farber. "That night when Gus saved me from the mugger, rapist, whatever he was?" She shuddered and took a deep, steadying breath. "That nightmare pulled everything together for me. It made everything clear." She met Farber's gaze. "The way Gus stalked me? What kind of stalking was that? You said it yourself. He never hurt me, or threatened me. He just wanted me to know he was *there.* He may have been stupid, but he wanted to remind me of the good years we had had. And then when he came to my

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rescue that night . . ."

The elevator door had opened and they stepped in. Farber said, "Mrs. Benjamin, have you ever been to Gus's repair shop?"

"No. Why?"

"I'd like to take you there for a look around. Because it's my guess there's a better than even chance your would-be mugger, rapist, whatever, is one of the bruisers who wrestles windshields into place for your ex."

Her eyes widened; that possibility had never occurred to her. She fell silent while the elevator wheezed up past two, three, and four. It rattled to a stop at five, prompting her to speak. "Either way. Either he rescued me or he went to enormous trouble to win me back." She thrust her chin forward. "Either way, I'd rather not know." The door had creaked open but Farber hadn't moved. "This is your floor, Lieutenant. Thank you again—most sincerely—for all your help."

Farber stepped out of the car. "Good luck," he said. "If there's ever anything I can do—" But the door had closed.

When he opened his apartment door he smelled cooking. Sylvie had beaten him home. Without removing his coat he went straight to the kitchen to share the news. After the briefest of greetings he said, "I just ran into Rita Benjamin."

Sylvie was peering into the oven. She said, "So now you remember both her names."

"Rita and Benjamin. What's so difficult about that?" He was not to be sidetracked. "Anyway, the husband is moving in. She's taking him back."

Sylvie closed the oven door. She didn't seem that surprised. "Ain't love grand?" she said.

He took the three quick steps to the oven and kissed her behind the ear, a spot she favored. "It sure is," he said. ●

Badfellas
by John M. Floyd

"Hello—FBI, Agent Lee."
"Joe Mundy, here, LAPD."
"What is it, Mundy?" Lee replied.
"I got two suspects, homicide."
"So why's the Bureau need to know?"
"The victim's from D.C.," said Joe.
"He's government, would be my guess?"
"Investigator, IRS."
"That's big," Lee said. "You have a lead?"
"We've more than that: They've been ID'ed."
"Good work. Who are they—mob hit men?"
"These two are meaner still, my friend."
"Who could you have, worse than the pros?"
"A pair of corporate CEOs."

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Damaged Goods

by Scott Mackay

Detective Barry Gilbert pushed Chad Danby's chin back. The fatal laceration to Danby's throat gaped, the force of the attack extreme, the wound at least two inches deep and three inches wide. The rink lights, rescue-flare bright, lit the scene with clinical harshness. A few snowflakes fell from the dark sky. Gilbert glanced at Danby's uniform—the Crescentview Ravens, a team of forty-somethings, a last hurrah for middle-aged men. Danby's hockey stick lay a good distance off, as did his helmet and gloves. His blood looked purple under the mercury-vapor lights. Gilbert inspected the blood patterns. Spray to the right indicated a quick chop to the carotid artery, as if with an axe. The dark pool around Danby's head suggested a general exsanguination thereafter. Skate marks, outlined in blood, now preserved in ice, gave clues to the killer's quick retreat to the far side of the rink.

Gilbert slid curling-style to the marks and examined each pinkish impression. He knelt. Size twelves, maybe? A big man. Could the lab determine the weight of the man based on the depth of the impression? he wondered.

He gazed up the hill, where he saw the prestigious Cranston Private School for Boys. An isolated spot, here at the bottom of the hill amidst these old pines—a perfect place for murder.

Joe Lombardo, his young partner, catalogue-model handsome, spoke to the school superintendent at the edge of the rink.

Lombardo glanced at Gilbert a few moments later and skidded gracefully over.

A professional musician before he became a full-time writer, Scott Mackay has displayed his considerable literary talents in two fiction genres. His science fiction novels include the well-reviewed *Orbis* and *Omnifix*, both published by Penguin/Roc, and he has received two Arthur Ellis Award nominations for his Barry Gilbert mystery novels. The latest book in the Gilbert series (to which this story belongs) is *Old Scores* (St. Martin's hardcover/Worldwide paperback).

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"The coroner's on the way?" asked Lombardo.

"I called him on my cell," said Gilbert. Gilbert motioned at Danby. "Look at the bruises on his face."

Lombardo glanced over. "A bit of high-sticking," he said.

Gilbert nodded gruffly. "Then someone stomped on his neck with a hockey skate."

"And I thought the NHL was rough," said Lombardo.

Gilbert rubbed the sides of his arms, then rolled his shoulders.

"Cold?" asked Lombardo.

"I should have worn a heavier coat."

"I bet you're looking forward to going down to Florida in two weeks."

"I can't wait," said Gilbert.

"Are you going to see your brother?" asked Lombardo.

"I always see Howard whenever I go down."

"He's still working with Metro-Dade Homicide?" asked Lombardo.

"He wouldn't trade it for anything," said Gilbert. He glanced at the superintendent, who was now climbing the stairs up the hill back to the school. "Did the superintendent have anything to say?" he asked.

Lombardo nodded. "He says Danby runs the league here, and that he's captain of the Crescentview Ravens. His son goes to school here. Nigel. The league rents rink time from the school. Danby looks after the rink when he plays. He opens it when he gets here. The games are always at six, so he gets here at five-thirty. He locks it when he leaves. He's always the last to leave. He gives the keys to the superintendent when he goes, usually around seven-thirty. It got to be eight o'clock, and the superintendent came down." Lombardo nodded toward Danby. "This is what he found."

"Did the superintendent hear anything beforehand?" asked Gilbert.

"No."

"Does he know anything about Danby?" asked Gilbert.

"Only that he owns a car dealership. Danby Honda. And a towing outfit."

"Any mention of Danby's wife?"

"No," said Lombardo.

"Or his friends?"

"Some of his teammates work for him at Danby Honda," said Lombardo. "There's a team list in the dressing room. And a game schedule. Tonight the Ravens played the Terminators."

Gilbert surveyed the scene. The Terminators. He shook his head. A crime of passion, he wondered, or something premeditated? The flurries fell like diamonds past the rink lights, pretty and tranquil—a disorienting contrast to the grisly mess on the rink.

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A little after nine that night, Gilbert drove to the well-to-do neighborhood of South Rosedale and informed Danby's wife, Cathy, of her husband's murder.

Cathy was a small, delicate woman in her early forties. She wore her hair with a bang across her brow, and a Doris Day flip at the back. He couldn't help noting the clothes, how formal they seemed for this time of the evening, as if she were expecting guests for a late dinner. She wore a pleated dress—pleated accordion-style, a curious throwback, just like her hair.

Her eyes clouded with tears when Gilbert told her the news. She had her legs crossed and her hands folded across her lap. When asked if she knew who might want to kill her husband, she couldn't take her eyes away from her hands, stared fixedly at the small girlish appendages as her tears continued to fall.

"I have no idea," she said.

She sat there rigidly, her eyes glistening, a look of suppressed panic on her face.

"Was he involved in anything that might be a source of conflict between him and any of his business colleagues?" asked Gilbert.

"He never tells me anything about his business colleagues," she said.

She had a high, sweet, feminine voice. Her eyes were doll-like, preternaturally blue with sharply etched retinal striations. They looked as if they would close by themselves if you laid her on her back.

"Does he have any enemies?" he asked.

"If he does, he never tells me about them," she said. "He prefers to insulate me from things like that. I always tell him he doesn't have to be quite so careful, but he always insists."

"Does he owe anybody money?"

"I have no idea. Chad looks after the money. He worked as a chartered accountant for years. He knows everything there is to know about money. He prefers to handle our budget by himself."

She pulled a tissue out of a Kleenex box and dabbed her eyes. She now looked pale, holding herself together by will power alone, and he wondered if it might not be a better idea to continue the interview at some other time. But he had gone this far, so thought he might as well continue.

"Did you ever go to any of his hockey games?" asked Gilbert.

"Sometimes."

"And was there ever any friction there? Between him and other players?"

"Not that I ever saw."

As Gilbert gazed at the woman, wondering if she actually thought her pleated dress was in some way fashionable, or if those

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white high heels could be anything but out of Central Casting 1965, it occurred to him that she seemed only half-formed. Someone who lived in Danby's shadow, suppressed. A woman Danby kept perpetually in the dark. Insulated, as she said. Maybe this was a source of discord between them.

"What about your marriage?" he asked. "Is there a problem there?"

She was a new widow, and he didn't want to be cruel, but he had to shake something loose here.

"No," she said, and offered nothing else.

Yet her eyes betrayed her. She was ingenuous—he could see it in all the timid nuances of her behavior, and especially in her eyes. She couldn't dissimulate well. He saw dissatisfaction in her eyes, hiding behind the larger and more overt manifestation of her grief and shock.

"Do you have a job?" he asked.

Her tears ebbed, and she looked at him as if she thought this was a strange question. But he wanted to get a bigger picture, a sense of her life—it might figure into the investigation at a later time.

"I help at the church," she said. "I lick stamps when there's a mail-out. I help with flower arrangements at weddings and funerals."

The focus of her life was indeed narrow. She grew weepy again. He glanced around the living room. The walls were brown. The furniture was brown. So was the broadloom. A life-sized ceramic cocker spaniel stood near the sliding glass door. He gestured around the room.

"Did you do the decorating?" he asked.

"Chad prefers to do the decorating," she said.

And again the dissatisfaction flickered in her doll-like eyes.

He heard a creak on the stairs. He turned. Gilbert saw Danby's eighteen-year-old son, Nigel, peer at him through the banister. Nigel wore black pants and combat boots, had an assortment of studs and rings pinned and skewered through his nose, lips, and ears. He wore a kilt over his black pants. His hair, shaved at the sides, was long on top, and one particular strand, braided with leather, dyed turquoise, dangled all the way to his waist.

Gilbert raised his hand. "Hi," he said.

"Hi," said Nigel.

Cathy, at the sight of her son, cried harder.

"What's wrong?" asked Nigel.

Cathy told him.

Mother and son traversed the harrowing terrain together. They tested the new absence with tears, questions, and denials. Gilbert did his best to be a guide, but it was never easy. Cathy clung to her

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son. Nigel didn't cry, simply went a shade paler. In this family, there were now only two, no longer three, and the new dynamic would take some getting used to—for both of them.

While Lombardo prowled the dealership the next day, speaking to a variety of employees, Gilbert focused on Ben Kandless, Danby's partner.

Kandless, a big man, fifty years old, thrust his square jaw forward when Gilbert broke the news. Kandless had stylish dark hair, a forthright angular nose, and wore a tweed blazer, an argyle vest, and a striped tie. His shoulders were as square as his jaw. Gilbert couldn't help thinking he was the right size—the forensic lab, having analyzed the skate impressions at the rink, had profiled the perpetrator at two hundred and twenty pounds, and over six feet tall. Kandless struck Gilbert as a relaxed man, too relaxed considering the nature of the situation.

"We found your name on the Ravens' team list," Gilbert said.

Kandless smiled modestly. "I'm more a golfer," he said. "But I'm not a bad shot on the ice, either."

"So you were there last night?" asked Gilbert.

"I was."

"And what time did you leave?" asked Gilbert.

"I left considerably before the end of the game," said Kandless. "My wife's not well. She called me. She wanted me to come home."

"And what time was that?" asked Gilbert.

"Around seven o'clock," said Kandless.

Gilbert glanced at a rack of smoking pipes and a parts catalogue that sat on Kandless's desk, thinking he would just have to ask the usual battery.

"Do you have any idea who might have wanted to kill Chad Danby?" he asked.

"None whatsoever," said Kandless.

Gilbert felt as if he were panning for gold in a river long since exhausted by previous prospectors.

"You must be familiar with his business dealings, though," said Gilbert. "Large amounts of money must go through this dealership."

Gilbert's implication was clear: Where there was money, there was motive.

"I look after the service and financing side of things here at Danby Honda," said Kandless. "Chad presides over inventory and sales. We work independently."

"But you must have meetings with him from time to time," said Gilbert.

"Every month." Kandless tapped his lips. "But business is business, Detective Gilbert, and I'm afraid there's not much more to it

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than that. You're wasting your time if you think Chad's murder has anything to do with Danby Honda. There's no one here who would want to kill him. He wasn't exactly the friendliest man. But he wasn't hateful, either. I won't say we don't have our problems here at Danby Honda, particularly since the company went public six months ago. But if you think anybody at Danby Honda . . . or even over at the towing division . . . no, I'm afraid not. We're all rather boring here. Nothing so dramatic as a murder. We come to work, we do our jobs, and then we go home. If there's any friction, we always work it out. I'm sorry about Chad. It's going to leave us in a real pinch, but I'm sure we'll muddle through somehow. I'll have the dealership send flowers to Mrs. Danby. I'll make sure there's a big employee presence at his funeral. I've instructed all our employees to be open and frank with you, and to cooperate fully. Other than that, there's little else I can do."

In the car going back to headquarters, Gilbert and Lombardo compared notes.

"He gave me nothing," said Gilbert.

Lombardo, on the other hand, had unearthed great chunks of revealing information.

"I spoke to Nicki Forrester," said Lombardo. "She's in the Finance Division. She tells me Danby Honda went public six months ago. Since then, Danby's been buying up stock, solidifying control, squeezing Kandless out."

"Kandless mentioned the public offering, but he didn't say anything about Danby trying to squeeze him out."

"Danby planned a leveraged buyout against Kandless a month ago." Lombardo ran his hand through his dark hair, his eyes narrowing. "Kandless was seeking a court injunction to stop it. Nicki tells me if Kandless is forced to sell, he'll lose big-time. He's borrowed on margin to keep pace with Danby. Now that the market's collapsed, he's lost his margin, and he has to hang on to the stock until it goes up again or else he'll face bankruptcy."

Desperation always found its way into the puzzle somehow, thought Gilbert. It was readily apparent why Kandless hadn't mentioned any of this, and it meant, of course, that they had to place Kandless on their list of suspects.

Lombardo continued.

"I also learned that Danby was closing the towing division," he said, "and that the drivers over there were angry about it. They're nonunion, and he gave them two weeks' notice, and many of them didn't think that was enough. That's something else we might want to check into. Nicki tells me Graham Ellis is the foreman over there. We can get more details from him if we need to."

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Up ahead, Gilbert saw a salt truck, blue light flashing, sprinkling salt on the road.

"I also spoke to a man in their legal department," said Lombardo. "John Labara. He plays for the Crescentview Ravens. He told me about an impending lawsuit. It involves a man named Tony Peltonen, a guy who plays for the Terminators. Peltonen has a reputation for being rough on the ice. He spends a lot of time in the penalty box."

The suspects now seemed to gather—softly, gently, inconspicuously—like the snow falling outside. First Kandless. Then angry drivers at the towing division. Now Tony Peltonen.

"I read his name on the Terminators' team list," said Gilbert.

Lombardo nodded. "He plays forward for the Terminators. He's suing Danby Honda. He bought a used Odyssey from Danby, then got in an accident because one of the axle joints failed. His daughter Melissa was killed in the accident. Peltonen and his lawyer are suing Danby Honda for millions of dollars. He came to Danby Honda one day a few weeks after he buried his daughter and threw a brick through one of those big showroom windows."

Gilbert had daughters of his own. He couldn't imagine losing one. Rage would most definitely be one of the things he would feel.

"Was he arrested?" asked Gilbert.

"No," said Lombardo. "Danby wanted to keep the whole thing quiet. He didn't press charges. He didn't want to publicize the Odyssey axle case."

Gilbert eased his foot on the brake as he approached the salt truck.

"So Peltonen was there on Tuesday night?" he asked.

"Yes," said Lombardo. "John Labara says Peltonen's a big man, and that he scuffled with Danby several times during the game. His size fits the forensic profile we have."

Jeff Albertson, an employee for Danby Towing, surrendered the next day.

Gilbert and Lombardo questioned him in the interview room. The video camera rolled. Albertson was tall, had a sloping forehead, and wore orange pants and a yellow shirt. His baseball cap had a picture of Bugs Bunny on it. He had close-set eyes. He made them go cross-eyed a number of times while the detectives questioned him. He spoke in monosyllabic sentences, often getting off topic, preferring to talk about any and all aspects of the towing business.

"And you were at the rink the night Chad Danby was murdered?" asked Gilbert.

"Yep."

"And you killed him?" asked Lombardo.

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Albertson gave them a boyish smile. "I killed that sucker dead."

"And you play . . ." Gilbert consulted the team list. "Defenseman for the Crescentview Ravens?"

"Yep."

"And you're sure you killed him?" asked Lombardo, because it was hard to believe, a guy like this, killing anybody.

Albertson got all excited. "I killed that sucker dead," he said.

Once they had Albertson in detention, Gilbert and Lombardo looked at each other. "He's . . . he's simple, isn't he?" said Lombardo.

"I think so," said Gilbert. "He knows a lot about towing, though. A bit like the Rain Man that way."

"Yes . . . but I'm talking IQ," said Lombardo. "Is he Down's?"

"No," said Gilbert. "People with Down's . . . they have this certain look. He doesn't have that look. But he's not normal . . . he's . . . challenged. On the other hand, he's big, and that's what we're looking for." Gilbert leaned forward and put his hands on the table. "He *could* have killed Danby. But I don't think so. No—what I think we have here is a bit of . . . I don't know . . . fantasy? Stress reaction from a man with a preexisting condition? I'm going to talk to Graham Ellis. I think it's time we looked into this whole Danby Towing thing a little more closely anyway."

Gilbert drove out to Danby Towing that afternoon.

A dour building with a white and yellow facade and two dilapidated gas pumps, it stood on an industrial road with a lot of other automotive businesses.

Gilbert found Graham Ellis, the foreman, sitting at his computer entering numbers into an Excel spreadsheet. A classic-cars calendar hung on the wall behind him. Ellis was in his late thirties, wore grease-stained coveralls, a baseball cap, and, oddly, a Caribbean good-luck bracelet on his right wrist. Papers lay scattered over the desk, three bankbooks had fallen to the floor, and a Mastercard bill and a Visa bill sat on top of the monitor, some columns of addition in ballpoint pen on the itemization page x-ed out with so much force the ink left deep grooves.

"Jeff's one of my best workers," Ellis told Gilbert when Gilbert explained the situation. "But you're right . . . he's damaged goods. I don't know if he's telling the truth or not. He boasts. He makes elaborate claims from time to time."

"Such as?" asked Gilbert.

Ellis stared out the window as he contemplated Albertson's claims.

"He dates Britney Spears, for one thing," said Ellis. "And the Queen of England is his mother. And he wins the Lotto 649 every day. And he . . . he never sleeps. Says he doesn't know how, says he's been awake his whole life. That's not counting the naps he

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takes in his tow truck every afternoon, of course." Ellis grinned. "But this . . . this is a new one. Don't take him seriously." Ellis shook his head. Gilbert could tell that Ellis was highly tolerant of Jeff. "Jeff lives a rich fantasy life, Detective. If you honestly think he had anything to do with Mr. Danby's murder . . ." Ellis shook his head again, dismissing the notion. "Uh-uh . . . I don't see it."

"We have him in detention right now." Gilbert shrugged apologetically. "We're going to have to fine him."

Ellis frowned. "Do you have to do that?" he asked. "He's going to be out of a job by the end of the month anyway. He can't afford a fine. Contrary to what he says, he doesn't win the Lotto 649 every day. He spends his paycheck as soon as he gets it. Why don't you let him off? He's harmless. I don't know what he's going to do once this place closes. He's not going to find a job easily."

"Speaking of which," said Gilbert, "I understand there's some bad feeling about Mr. Danby closing down the towing division."

"Of course there is," said Ellis. "I've got seven guys, and they're all losing their jobs. Mr. Danby says he can't make money from it, but I show him the books every month, and every month he's got profit coming in. Not much, but enough to keep us going."

"And to the best of your knowledge, did any of your workers ever utter any threats against Mr. Danby?"

"No." A beleaguered look came to Ellis's eyes. "They're just regular guys, Detective. There's no postal mentality here. There never was. They're not going to kill their employer just because they have to look for other jobs now. They've all got more sense than that."

"What about Jeff?" asked Gilbert. "Was Jeff angry?"

"Jeff never gets angry," said Ellis. "You should just let him go."

"I saw his name on the team list," said Gilbert. "We understand he was there on Tuesday night."

Ellis sighed. "Look, Detective . . . Mr. Danby lets him play, or at least lets him stand on skates in a corner of the rink so he can feel he's part of everything. We all like Jeff. We're glad we've given a guy like him a chance at Danby Towing, and that it's worked out so well. Like I say, it's going to be tough for him to find a job, and that's what's got me more rankled than anything." Ellis shrugged dismissively. "Him coming to see you—and boasting that he killed Mr. Danby—it's nothing more, you know, than a symptom of the way he is."

"Do you know Tony Peltonen?" asked Gilbert.

"Yes, sir," said Ellis.

"Why the look?" asked Gilbert.

"The guy's a jerk."

"Why's that?"

"We're supposed to be a no-contact league. He's too rough. He's always picking fights."

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Gilbert nodded. "That's what we've heard," he said, and decided it was time to talk to Peltonen.

Tony Peltonen was employed as an insurance broker, sold mainly car insurance, and worked out of a storefront office on a treeless suburban thoroughfare in East York, not far from where Gilbert lived. Peltonen sat behind his desk as cars went by out on the sunny street, the reflections from their windshields brightening his face off and on. A scab crusted the bridge of his nose—the work of a hockey puck? The sleeves of his suit jacket were too short, and his shoulders, tight to the fabric, looked like they might burst out Incredible-Hulk-style any minute.

"Why would I want him dead?" asked Peltonen, his voice deep, loud, and affronted. "If the criminal suit against Danby Honda failed, my lawyer and I were going to launch a civil suit against Danby personally. I need him alive for that."

"Witnesses say you fought with him on Tuesday night," said Gilbert.

"All game-related," said Peltonen, as if it were perfectly okay to beat the crap out of someone over a game.

"And you left directly after the game?" asked Gilbert.

"Yes."

"In your own car? Or did you get a lift with someone?"

"In my own car."

"Did you give anybody a lift?" asked Gilbert.

Peltonen's thick brow settled and his eyes smoldered as he gazed at Gilbert.

"No."

"And you went home immediately?"

Peltonen expelled a great sigh through his nostrils with excessive force, as if he were getting fed up with answering Gilbert's questions and couldn't understand why he had to cooperate.

"Yes," said Peltonen.

"And your wife was at home?"

Gilbert was trying to find a way to confirm the man's alibi.

Peltonen looked away. "My wife and I are separated," he said.

Peltonen might have been an ape in a suit, but the look of pain Gilbert now saw in the man's eyes was all too human. He thought of Melissa, the little girl who had lost her life in the accident. Sometimes a child's death was more than a marriage could stand.

"How many players at the rink when you finally left?" asked Gilbert.

A line came to Peltonen's brow as he tried to recall. "A few guys were climbing the hill to the parking lot," he said. "The rink was empty."

"Guys from your team, or from the Ravens?" asked Gilbert.

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"Guys from my team."
"Ever been arrested?" asked Gilbert.
"Twice."
"For what?"
"Aggravated assault," said Peltonen.
"Both times?" asked Gilbert.
"Yes."
A wild man, thought Gilbert. Impulsively violent.
"Ever go to jail?" asked Gilbert.
"I was in Milhaven for three months," said Peltonen.
"On one of the assault charges?"
"Yes. I dangled a guy from a window. But I didn't drop him. I wasn't about to drop him from twenty stories up."
Damaged goods, thought Gilbert, just like Albertson, but in his own special violent way.

Gilbert got back to headquarters and found Nigel Danby, Chad's son, waiting for him in the Homicide office. Today, the young man wore black leather pants, a black leather shirt, and had his long strand of braided hair dyed magenta. His eyes, ringed with eyeliner, stared at Gilbert with catatonic blankness.
"Um . . . my mom and Ben see each other," he said. "I thought I better tell you. My friend lives around the corner from here. He said I should mention it. So here I am."
Nigel looked away, as if revealing this unflattering fact about his mother made him uncomfortable. Gilbert had to make the stretch: Cathy Danby—she of the Doris Day hairdo, the pleated dress, and the insulated lifestyle—having an affair with Ben Kandless behind her husband's back. It was hard to believe. He had to change his view. Not that he condoned adultery, but maybe she wasn't as suppressed as he had at first imagined.
"And how long has this been going on?" he asked.
"I don't know," said Nigel. "I found out three months ago. Dad might have known longer."
Gilbert had to probe here, even at the risk of upsetting Nigel.
"Did your mom know that your dad knew?" he asked.
"No. Mom's a bit . . . out of it."
"Did your dad ever speak to you about it?"
"No. Dad doesn't talk about things." Nigel averted his eyes. "I should tell you about the phone call, too."
Gilbert leaned forward.
"What phone call?"
Nigel glanced around the Homicide office. "Ben was over once," he said, "and he made this phone call. I was upstairs. I picked up the spare-room extension because I wanted to call my friend . . . and I heard Ben talking to this guy on the phone." Outside, snow

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blew against the window, ticking off the pane like the distant rattle of a snare drum. "Ben told this guy that once the business with the buyout was finished, and my dad was out of the way, he would transfer funds down to Florida." Nigel turned to him. "I didn't think anything of it at the time. But under the circumstances . . . you can see why I thought I better tell you." Nigel looked suddenly worried. "Don't tell Ben, though. He's got a temper. And don't tell my mom, either. She doesn't know that I know, and she always feels that she has to be the perfect mom in front of me."

He had Cathy Danby come down to headquarters. Despite what Nigel had asked him to promise, he had to speak to Cathy Danby about Ben Kandless. But at least by speaking to his mother down here, where he could keep it confidential, he could try to spare Nigel some upset.

They sat in the interview room. She glanced around nervously. She didn't seem comfortable in public. Suffocating in Danby's web of insulation, she probably hadn't had much practice in public.

"I know about you and Ben," he told her.

The corners of her lips sank, and her eyes widened, and the color crept through her face. He could tell this was hard for her. She was a good woman, too good, too concerned about what other people thought of her, the kind of woman who, as a girl, had undoubtedly been the teacher's pet. Her face was equal parts shame, mortification, and distress. It took her close to a minute to pull herself together.

"How did you find out?" she finally asked.

"It's not important how I found out," he said. "But if there's anything you want to say to me about it, now's the time. I'm giving you this chance."

Her eyes sank to her hands and she again gazed at those small girlish appendages as if thinking they might do something to help her.

"There's nothing I *can* say about it," she said. "You have the essential fact. If you want to know why, I scarcely understand it myself. I found myself with Ben. He makes me laugh. He takes me places. Chad always . . ." She paused, as if she were trying to find her voice. "Chad wouldn't let me do things. When I wanted to join the Museum Reading Club, he was against it. He said I shouldn't be reading books. I should be reading lifestyle magazines. But I . . . he wouldn't give me the money for the Reading Club. And that's just an example. I wanted to participate in a real discussion. Chad and I never have real discussions." Her eyes grew pensive. "That's where Ben comes in. We have real discussions." But now a line of doubt creased her brow. "Yet even with Ben . . ." She looked positively woeful. "Even with Ben . . . he has certain ideas . . . of what I

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should be doing. And I suppose he's right. I never finished my Arts degree, and what good is an Arts degree anyway?" Her shoulders sagged, as if she had given up on herself. "I have no ideas of my own. That's the problem."

Cathy couldn't tell him if Kandless had any connections in Florida.

"I have no idea," she said, which seemed to be her favorite refrain.

As a result, Gilbert and Lombardo spent much of the next day doing grunt work to find out what they could about the matter.

Gilbert called the phone company for records. Lombardo tackled the banks.

The telephone records indicated only one Florida call from the Danby residence in the last little while: to the Best Western Hotel in Coral Gables. Gilbert lowered the phone record to his desk with an exasperated sigh. Damn. While the number might confirm Nigel's story about a phone call to Florida, the number itself was a public one, wasn't specific, and couldn't be used to either pinpoint or eliminate any of the suspects on their list.

Only when Lombardo came back with the bank records were they able to narrow things down.

"The Danby Honda Service account transferred twenty-five thousand dollars to an account in Coral Gables, Florida the day after the murder," said Lombardo. "The account belongs to Sunquest Fishing Charters, an outfit run by a man named Cory Feld." Lombardo gave him an inquiring look. "Doesn't Ben Kandless run the service department at Danby Honda?"

"He does," said Gilbert. He lifted his personal phone book. "I'm going to phone my brother Howard. He might be able to help us with this."

It took a few days, but Gilbert's brother, a Metro-Dade detective, finally phoned him from Miami with some particulars on Cory Feld and Sunquest Fishing Charters.

"Sunquest is just down the street from the Best Western in Coral Gables."

The company's history of ownership surprised Gilbert.

"Graham Ellis was a partner in Sunquest at one time?" Gilbert asked his brother.

"That's what it says right here," said Howard. "On the small-business registration form. Why? Is he connected to your case in some way?"

"He works for Danby Towing," said Gilbert. "And it certainly firms up my suspicion that Kandless must have spoken to Cory Feld. Whether Graham Ellis is involved in any way, it's too early to tell."

When Gilbert hung up, he explained the situation to Lombardo. A line of perplexity etched its way across Lombardo's forehead.

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"How do we confirm Cory Feld was the one Kandless spoke to, though?" asked Lombardo. "The number was for the Best Western, and even though Sunquest is just down the street, and Ellis was a partner in Sunquest, it could have been anybody Kandless talked to. Until we prove the connection, how do we put pressure on Cory Feld?"

Gilbert glanced over his notes. "I've got a plan," he said.

But before Gilbert could put his plan into action, he got a telephone call from Mike Strutton in Patrol.

"We just picked up Tony Peltonen," said the captain. "We knew you had him under investigation for the murder of Chad Danby so we thought we better let you know. He was in a fight. In a bar close to where he works. The victim's in hospital and bashed up bad. Peltonen had a knife."

Mike Strutton described the attack, and while it paralleled in many respects the attack on Chad Danby at the skating rink, including a gash across the victim's throat, and heightened Gilbert's suspicion that Tony Peltonen might be their perpetrator after all, he wasn't prepared to abandon Cory Feld, Ben Kandless, and Graham Ellis as suspects just yet.

"Hold him, Mike," he said. "We'll be down to question him in a bit."

After calling Technical Support, and getting a judge to sign the necessary legal papers for a phone tap, Gilbert called Sunquest Fishing Charters.

"Is this Cory Feld?" he asked.

"Yes, it is," said Feld. "Can I help you?"

"I'm interested in doing some ocean fishing."

Gilbert engaged the man in a bogus conversation about ocean fishing, on and on about a fictitious Florida vacation he was planning. Meanwhile, a tape recorder caught a more than adequate sample of Cory Feld's voice on tape.

Nigel Danby came down a few hours later and listened to the conversation.

"That's him," said Nigel. "That's the man Ben talked to."

With an unexplained twenty-five thousand dollars in the Sunquest account from the Danby Honda Service account, Nigel Danby's identification of Cory Feld's voice was all Gilbert needed.

He phoned Howard the next day, outlined the new developments, and Howard in turn had Metro-Dade Police apprehend Feld.

Gilbert received a call from Howard later that afternoon.

"We've got him," said Howard. "Once we told him what you had, he fell to pieces like a house of cards. He's confirmed your suspicions, Barry. Ben Kandless and Graham Ellis conspired to kill Chad Danby. Feld didn't play much of a part. Kandless hired Ellis to kill Danby, and Ellis needed a safe place to put his money. Feld laundered it for him through the Sunquest account. Both Feld and

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Ellis are in debt up to their ears."

Gilbert recalled the array of disorganized bankbooks and credit-card bills in Ellis's office.

"Thanks, Howard," he said. "You're the best."

When Gilbert got off the phone, he pondered the tangents of the case. You never knew how an investigation would play out. Jeff Albertson and Tony Peltonen, both nut cases in their own separate ways—both damaged goods, as Ellis would call them—had ultimately been innocent.

He shook his head at the irony of the thing.

It took the seemingly sane ones to do the killing.

Gilbert and Lombardo encountered unexpected difficulty making the arrests the next day. An overnight blizzard had buried the city in a foot of snow. Even though Gilbert signed out one of the four-wheel-drives, it took him well over an hour to reach Danby Honda, where he served Kandless the arrest warrant.

Lombardo, meanwhile, struggled through the treacherous streets to the towing division to serve Ellis with his warrant.

"This is preposterous," said Kandless when Gilbert served him. "I had nothing to do with Chad's murder."

"Nigel identified Cory Feld's voice," said Gilbert, and left it at that, not giving the man any context, just offering him this unique aspect of the case—voice identification—as something he could brood about on the way down to headquarters.

After that, Gilbert drove to the Danby residence to see Cathy Danby.

By this time, snowplows had cleared many main arteries, but the small residential streets in South Rosedale, tucked away here and there, resembled cross-country ski trails more than municipal roads. Even for an all-wheel-drive, navigation through these thoroughfares proved a fifty-fifty prospect. Gilbert finally parked his vehicle two blocks away from the Danbys' exclusive cul-de-sac residence on Beaumont Road and walked the rest of the way in.

He found Cathy Danby on the driveway with a snow shovel, struggling to clear a path down the middle. Cathy looked small. She looked . . . abandoned. Gilbert made his way with some difficulty through the snow. He glanced around the drive. Did she actually plan to clear all this? There had to be at least sixty tons of snow here. She was a small, delicate woman, unused to such heavy work.

"Don't you have a snow blower?" asked Gilbert.

"I don't know how to work it," said Cathy. "Chad always did the outdoor work."

"We arrested Ben," he told her.

She cried when she heard this. He had to spend several minutes

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consoling her, and explaining things to her. As he suspected, she had no idea.

"I'm so stupid," she finally said.

"You're not stupid."

"What am I going to do?" she asked. "Everything's been left to me. I was counting on Ben to help me run Danby Honda, but now, of course, I don't even want to get near the man. I know nothing about running a business like that. Chad never spoke to me about any of it."

He had no answer for her. He felt sorry for her.

"The Crown Prosecutor may have to speak to you," he said.

She nodded. "Whatever they need me to do," she said.

He left her. What else could he do? He had to hope that she could put the pieces of her life back together.

As he reached the street, he glanced back. She started shoveling. He was surprised by how quickly she shoveled, and by how strongly. He suddenly wasn't worried about her anymore, or at least not as much. He recalled her desire to join the Reading Club at the museum, against her husband's wishes, how she had told her husband he didn't have to be quite so careful in insulating her, and how, with her extramarital affair, she had finally rebelled, despite her sweet, if conservative, nature. Now she was shoveling snow. A lot of it. If she had the determination to shovel sixty tons of snow, she might have the determination to run Danby Honda.

He turned around and continued walking. Up ahead he saw the blue light of a snowplow flashing. He mulled things over.

She was without her husband, without her lover. She was a woman with little experience—licking stamps for church mail-outs and arranging flowers for funerals and weddings was about the limit of her expertise. But Gilbert now knew she would make it. He listened to the rhythm his boots made as they crunched through the snow. Maybe it was like chopping down two big trees and letting some light in for a little tree. Murder was sad. He glanced back once more. She tossed a big pile of snow into an ever-growing ridge. But every so often some small good came of it. Cathy Danby was going to bury her husband, and she would grieve for him, and perhaps she might even grieve for Ben Kandless because Ben Kandless was going away for a long time—but in her new personal landscape, free and alone, and perhaps at first desperate, she would find resources in herself she never knew she had. There was no fixing a man like Jeff Albertson, or even a man like Tony Peltonen. But he believed that in Cathy Danby, at least, the damage might be reversible. After years of living in the shadows, she was finally coming into the light. He continued walking. It looked like it was going to snow again. But he suspected no matter how much it snowed, Cathy Danby would be out there shoveling it. ●

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Art by Allen Davis

The Blunderbuss Trick

by James Powell

On a warm August night in 1884, Ambrose Ganelon II, or Fiston, as his father liked to call him, emerged from a dark side street onto one of the brighter boulevards leading to the rue du Trac, the heart of San Sebastiano's theater district. He wore a silk top hat, evening dress, and white gloves over his large hands and carried a cane.

If he resembled an idle man-about-town, Ganelon was in fact carrying the considerable burden of caring for a father, the founder of the family detective agency, who suffered from oboe madness and saw his archrival Dr. Ludwig Fong in every dark corner. In addition, the gendarmeries of Europe were pressing the detective for help regarding the mysterious jewel thief who had for the last several years been plundering the Continent's tiaras, lavalieres, and diamond bracelets. Soon, Ganelon was sure, the police would start to wonder if he was up to the Founder's mark in crime-solving acuity. All Ganelon could do was pray his father would have a lucid moment when he could lay before him the details of the thefts.

But the bow cannot remain forever bent. So when Pierre Gramont

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sent box tickets for his acting company's production of the popular French farce *At Home With the Choufleur Family,* Ganelon decided to take in the play, leaving the Founder in the able hands of Achmed, their Berber coachman.

Ganelon's father and Gramont had long been friends and staunch admirers of Shakespeare. Ganelon could still remember, years before, a discussion of *King Lear* during which the elder Ganelon had uttered a giggle of the hashish-eater's sort, a symptom of the early stages of oboe madness, and asked Gramont, "If a king named his eldest daughter Goneril, what would he call his wolfhound?" When the actor shrugged, Ganelon shouted triumphantly, "Doggerel!"

It is a mark of how inclusive the PWA has become that last year one of the nominees for its Shamus Award for Best Short Story was a Ganelon tale by James Powell. The Ganelon stories are about as far from the classical P.I. story as one could possibly get, for they're often a wild mix of fantasy and complex puzzle spinning. We salute the PWA for recognizing the charm and merit of these wonderful tales! ¶

Gramont had once played Ganelon's father in the long-running adaptation of Austin Marchpane's novel *The Bridge of Traded Dreams,* borrowing many of the Founder's mannerisms, which the audience recognized and greeted with applause. However, he was too tall to use the detective's habit of raising himself up on tiptoes just before he pointed his accusing finger at the perpetrator of the crime.

As a poor young aspiring thespian Gramont had perfected his diction, like Demosthenes, with pebbles in his mouth and shouting to be heard above the roar of the Mediterranean. But bad teeth had obliged him to make his start on stage playing the villain, where he could hide his mouth behind his hand in dastardly asides or make his exits and entrances with his cape up around his nose. (The hissing from the audience was augmented by several rows of students from the School of Dentistry.)

When he could afford it, Pierre had his teeth extracted and replaced with dentures of hippopotamus bone, which gave him a lantern jaw, limiting him to country-yokel roles. Later, when European ivory prices tumbled after the discovery of the Alpine valley where the descendants of Hannibal's elephants went to die, Pierre purchased teeth of ivory, providing the noble jut to his jaw to play kings and romantic leads. Throughout his career he had special dentures designed for important roles. The twisted set he used for Richard III was all the deformity he needed to bring to the part.

Ganelon's elegant steps took him past the Royal Theater, the home of Maurice Lavoisin's acting company. Lavoisin was Gra-

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mont's great rival. The theater was closed between productions. When the detective paused outside to examine the kiosk of coming attractions he was delighted to find a concert by the pianist Flora Tadema, "La Belle Flora," as she was called. "Her first appearance ever in San Sebastiano," the announcement read. "Straight from her triumphs in Vienna, Paris, and London."

Ganelon gave a bitter laugh. His own recent tour of those same cities investigating the latest jewel thefts had been less than triumphant. However, when he came to Paris in the matter of the Viviani pearl necklace stolen two weeks before, Monsieur Claude, the city's famous chief of detectives, had invited him to the opening night of La Belle Flora's engagement there. Ganelon had already been impressed by the woman's philanthropic endeavors, including her establishment of a conservatory of music in Copenhagen for the care and education of the musically talented children of the poor. But now he was captivated by her beauty and her musical ability. Later, Claude had taken him backstage to meet the woman herself. Ganelon sent her flowers the next day. But his father's illness had called him home before he could visit her again. Now, it seemed, La Belle Flora was coming to him.

Pleased, Ganelon continued on his way. His thoughts turned to the theatrical rivalry between Gramont and Lavoisin which had almost bankrupted them both. In one disastrous year, each did productions of *Tartuffe* and *The Merchant of Venice.* ("Why is the quality of mercy like a dinner of leftovers?" Ganelon's father had giggled. When Gramont shook his head the Founder roared, "Because they're both twice blessed.") After that fiasco, Gramont and Lavoisin got together quietly every year to make sure no such season ever happened again.

Lavoisin was a handsome man with a wonderfully cleft chin and was given to broad gestures and theatrical poses. He styled himself the King of Theater. (Ganelon's father snorted and insisted, "At best he's the theater marquee.")

When Ganelon reached the Bijou Theater, Gramont was in the lobby greeting his patrons, looking rather gray and worn. The detective had heard the man's health was poor. His teeth of the moment were of Damascene steel. Until two years ago he had appeared on stage as Pierre the Stone Eater during the scene-changing between the second and third acts, eating a variety of objects, munching on rocks as if they were apples, chewing on tin cans and pieces of iron chain. But if his teeth were steel his stomach was not.

Then Gramont changed his act to one where he caught in his teeth a fat musket ball, a punkin ball, as the Americans call them, fired from a blunderbuss pistol with a flared barrel, which diligence drivers used thirty years before to protect themselves and their passengers from highwaymen. Ganelon had not yet seen this act.

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As leading man, Gramont had always been clean-shaven. But now he wore a beard on his chin and lip of the kind called a "door-knocker." Seeing Ganelon, he gave a tired but genuine smile, resembling nothing less than a beckoning front door, knocker, steel nameplate, and all. The old trouper's breath smelled of peppermint, for, he confessed, the steel teeth gave his mouth a terrible taste.

He escorted Ganelon up the several flights of stairs to his box and then sat down with him for a moment. "A pity your father couldn't come," he said. "Before my blunderbuss trick tonight Lavoisin and I are going to announce the merger of our two acting companies. Yes, we signed the agreement yesterday. By year's end Lavoisin will sell the Royal and invest the money in making much-needed improvements here at the Bijou."

"Hard to imagine you two working in harness."

"When we disagree, we will flip a coin," explained Gramont. "That's the way it will be until one of us dies or chooses to retire. And when we're both gone, my oldest boy Edmond will take over."

Reasonable enough, thought Ganelon. In proper Montague and Capulet style, Edmond and Lavoisin's only child Marie had met and married. Edmond was a competent actor, a tall, bland-faced man who took to makeup well. Ganelon understood some bad feeling existed between Gramont and Edmond. Edmond's son Philippe, off studying at the Comédie Française, was blossoming into an actor of extraordinary ability. Not wanting his son's talent stunted by a diet of farce, Edmond was pushing for the acting company to return to a more elegant repertoire, to Corneille, Racine, and Shakespeare. As much as he would have it otherwise, Pierre Gramont didn't think there was an audience large enough to support the classics.

Now Ganelon saw Madame Aveline Barbeau enter a box across the way escorted by Maurice Lavoisin, who paused in the doorway of the box, hand on his heart, head bowed, the same theatrical entrance he made to give dead Caesar's eulogy.

In his long acting career Lavoisin had accumulated so many bits of effective stage business that they spilled over into his everyday life. When he took something up to examine in a shop it always became poor Yorick's skull. At table, when he raised his steak knife, he was Shylock about to extract his pound of flesh. Having untied a particularly difficult knot in his shoelace, he became the Count of Monte Cristo standing free at last in the shadow of the Chateau d'If. Lavoisin approached each novelty of the day with wide, Rip van Winkle eyes.

Aveline Barbeau had been a celebrated beauty in her youth. Both Gramont and Lavoisin had competed for her heart. But she had married Alphonse Barbeau, a wealthy banker now deceased who had passed on to her a closed box containing his mother's dearest possession, a priceless pink diamond called the Baghdad

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Rose, a stone so beautiful, legend had it, that whoever owned it would kill to keep it and whoever saw it would have no peace until they possessed it. No one knew how many lives had been lost across the centuries as the Baghdad Rose changed hands.

Fear of the stone being stolen had turned the banker's mother into something of a recluse. But Aveline was a more convivial person. In fact, she was a notorious chatterbox. Still, she never left her apartment without wearing the diamond inside a small gold filigree ball around her neck.

Ganelon was happy she wore the pendant that evening. Just as the Founder's archrival was Ludwig Fong, so Ganelon had to contend with Fong's son Duhamel, member of the French Academy, who, according to the detective's informants, craved the Baghdad Rose, but had not yet mustered the courage to come up against Ganelon to possess it.

Someone else had come into the box behind Lavoisin and took a seat in the shadows on the far side of Madame Barbeau, a man with a black eye-patch. As Gramont rose to return to the lobby Ganelon asked who the man was and was told it was a Monsieur Andersen, the advance man for La Belle Flora, come to make the arrangements for her upcoming concert.

As he waited for the play to begin, Ganelon looked around the theater. Above and behind him was the Sprat Gallery as it was called, the balcony of cheap seats tucked beneath the ceiling. It took its name from the painted ceiling overhead depicting the wedding of the Cornichon, the happy little river that runs through the middle of San Sebastiano, and the Mediterranean. There is Princess Gloriana amid sea demigods with conch-shell trumpets and mer-people and fishes of every size from sprat to leviathan.

Now the houselights dimmed.

The play was standard farce, a hash of mistaken identity, people in disguises, love letters gone astray, and eavesdroppers misunderstanding what they overheard. It reminded Ganelon of nothing less than the Gramont household when he was a young teenaged visitor. His first love had been Olivia Gramont, then in her early twenties.

The Gramonts were a large extended family of young men and women with their beaus, all making up plays, having emotional crises, or disguising themselves to fool each other. There was much going in and out of the windows and doors.

The Gramont parents assumed their children would marry good-looking people with stage presence to augment the acting company. But they also encouraged them to choose mates with sewing and scene-painting skills. In fact, Marie Gramont, née Lavoisin, painted a Bay of Naples set with Vesuvius smoking in the background that some said surpassed the original.

One summer Ganelon helped out when the acting company

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made a short tour into the south of France, working as an extra and operating the thunder-box and the rain machine to be near his love. Later, when people claimed to have previous existences in which they were Egyptian slaves, Roman legionnaires, or priests of Atlantis, Ganelon had to smile, for that summer he had been all those things and master of the weather as well.

As the second-act curtain fell, Pierre Gramont came out on stage carrying a large bull's-eye on an easel. His son Edmond followed, still dressed as Monsieur Choufleur, the patriarch of the family in the previous scene, in fez, smoking jacket, and Persian slippers. Ganelon mused on the actor's moustache. Its waxed ends twirled upwards as is mandatory for cuckolds in French farces and was identical to the one worn by villains in English melodramas. Edmond maintained his character's mincing walk as he pushed a small, wheeled table holding the blunderbuss pistol and the accessories needed in the act.

Amid the polite applause Gramont approached the footlights. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "instead of asking for a volunteer from among you to aid me in this next little act, tonight let me make my own choice. Please welcome to this stage my colleague Monsieur Maurice Lavoisin." Uncertain applause greeted this announcement, for the audience knew the two men to be bitter rivals.

Lavoisin strode out from behind the curtain and paused, hand on heart, head bowed. Then the two men embraced, shook hands, and posed smiling out across the footlights. "Ladies and gentlemen," said Gramont, "this is an historic moment for Monsieur Lavoisin and myself. From this day forward, our two companies of actors will become one."

Lavoisin joined in. "Soon this theater will be the Royal Bijou," he said, "so as better to serve San Sebastiano's theatrical needs."

When the two men had bowed to the applause, Gramont said, "I shall now ask my son to hand Monsieur Lavoisin a knife and the musket ball. Monsieur Lavoisin, please notch the ball with some identifying mark." When Lavoisin did so, Edmond took the musket ball and held it aloft between thumb and finger to show the audience, although at that distance there was nothing to see. Then he returned the shot to Lavoisin and handed him the blunderbuss, a short ramrod, and a powder horn.

Now Gramont ordered him to pour in the powder charge, drop the ball down the barrel, and tamp it in place with the ramrod. When that was done, Gramont took the blunderbuss, cocked the hammer, and handed the weapon back to Lavoisin.

Then Gramont stepped backwards ten paces, placing his head squarely in the bull's-eye of the target. Putting one hand inside his mouth, Gramont moved his lower jaw back and forth several times as though limbering it up. He followed this by taking a series of little practice bites out of the air. Then he took several

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deep breaths. Finally Gramont folded his arms across his chest and nodded to Lavoisin to fire.

Pointing the blunderbuss pistol at Gramont's head, Lavoisin pulled the trigger. There was a flash and a loud bang.

As Ganelon had heard the act described, Gramont would either stagger back as though hit by the shot, struggle to keep his footing, and then turn to face the audience with a smile and the musket ball held tightly between his steel teeth. Or he would stiffen, fall straight over onto his back, and lie there as if dead before jumping up to his feet with a shot-decorated smile.

Tonight was a very impressive fall backwards. Several long seconds ticked by as everyone waited for Gramont to jump to his feet. When he didn't move, a frowning Lavoisin went over and knelt down beside him. Then the blunderbuss pistol fell from his hand and he turned a horrified face to the audience.

Before the heavy fire curtain with its immense design of intertwined roses and cabbages had come thumping onto the stage, Ganelon was halfway down the stairs from his box. It took him several minutes to find his way through the crowded main aisle where the confused audience was milling about.

He arrived backstage where the cast were standing in the wings, the women crying real tears, the men staring blankly as though they had forgotten their lines. Ganelon ordered the stage manager to send for the police.

Act Three opened in the living room of the Choufleur family's country house with piano, sofa, easy chairs, and French doors framing a tailored lawn edged with trees. Olivia Gramont, as the handsome Madame Choufleur, sat crying at the piano where she would have been discovered playing a lively polka when the curtain rose. Ganelon gave her a sympathetic nod. He walked past Edmond Gramont and Lavoisin, who were shouting at each other, and over to the footlights where Dr. Victor Castine knelt examining Gramont's body.

Physician to the acting community, Castine spent his evenings at the theater sitting with his medical bag across his knees, alert as a bird, waiting for his own moment on the stage when someone would step from behind the curtain and ask if there was a doctor in the house.

"He is quite dead," said the doctor, catching sight of the detective out of the corner of his eye.

"No blood," observed Ganelon.

"He was not shot."

Behind them, the young Gramont and Lavoisin had started grappling with each other and Olivia was on her feet shouting at them to have some respect for the dead.

The doctor leaned over the body, sniffed the dead man's lips, and signaled to invite the detective to do the same.

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"Prussic acid," said Ganelon.

Castine nodded. "Though how it was administered I cannot say."

The detective gestured toward the body. "May I?" He took off a glove and reached inside the dead man's mouth. After a moment he pulled out a fat musket ball notched with an X. Ganelon turned it over and found a neat hole three-quarters of an inch deep drilled into the lead. "Enough for a fatal dose of prussic acid, I would say."

Castine agreed. "Plug the hole with a drop or two of melted peppermint lozenge and let it harden. Pop the musket ball in your mouth. When your saliva melts the plug, you die."

"Could it have been suicide?"

Castine lowered his voice. "I had been treating Gramont for cancer, which had progressed to the lymph nodes. Had he come to me earlier, surgery might have been an option. As it was, I told him he had less than a year to live. But suicide?" He shook his head. "There are simpler ways to kill oneself."

Ganelon wasn't sure. By casting the blame for his death on his old enemy Lavoisin, Gramont would be giving control of the merged acting company to his son Edmond. On the other hand, the Pierre Gramont he'd spoken to tonight had hardly seemed suicidal.

Curious to see what Ganelon had found in the corpse's mouth, Lavoisin and Edmond broke off their pushing and shouting and came over. Olivia joined them.

Ganelon held out the piece of shot.

"That's not my mark," said Lavoisin haughtily, turning his back on the musket ball and folding his arms the way Simon Saint-Elme denied the baby in his wife's arms in Hamelin's *Cast out into the Storm*.

"It certainly is," insisted Edmond. But he spoke without conviction as though shamed by his moustache.

"I initialed it with an L," replied Lavoisin.

Edmond stripped off his moustache and shouted, "Liar! Hundreds saw you shoot my father."

"Then where's the blood? Or are you telling me he was elf shot?" Lavoisin made his finger into a pistol. "Bang," he said like a child playing at musketeer.

Ganelon understood the elf-shot reference. At Heidelberg he had belonged to a university drinking club whose members were required to deliver a speech mocking their own field of study. Ganelon had spoken on the Forensics of Fairyland, dwelling in particular on elf arrows, which killed without making a wound.

"Pierre Gramont wasn't shot," he said, turning the lead ball over to reveal the hole. "He was poisoned."

"But how?" asked Olivia. "I mean, wouldn't the poisoner have had to know how the trick works? Father never told anyone."

"Certainly not me," said Lavoisin.

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Ganelon picked up the blunderbuss. "One thing we *can* say with certainty is this: No man can catch a fired musket ball in midair with his teeth. Not even steel teeth." As the detective examined the weapon, he recalled that during his performance Gramont made much show of not touching the musket ball. As a matter of fact, he never touched the blunderbuss except to cock the hammer. But why? He'd let Lavoisin load the pistol with powder and shot. Why not let him cock it? Why risk passing around a cocked and loaded pistol?

Ganelon pulled back the hammer and discovered that in so doing he opened a door the size of the musket ball behind the trigger guard. "That's how the trick worked," he said. "When Gramont raised the pistol barrel, the marked musket ball would roll into his palm. He slipped it into his mouth later, probably while he was exercising his jaw. But someone had switched the musket ball for a poisoned one."

Lavoisin turned on Edmond. "You switched the shot when you showed it to the audience," he shouted. "You killed your own father. Now you blame me." He used the edge of his hand to chop down on his wrist. "I get a visit with Madame Guillotine. You get the acting company."

"You both had the opportunity to switch musket balls," said Ganelon. "That means one of you may still have in your possession the original musket ball."

"The one with my mark on it," said Lavoisin. "Of course. A brilliant deduction." He raised his arms over his head dramatically. "Search me, Monsieur Ganelon. I insist."

Ganelon obliged him and found nothing. Now Edmond Gramont raised his arms, too. When Ganelon searched him he discovered a musket ball in a pocket of his smoking jacket.

"That's my mark!" cried Lavoisin, pointing to the L scratched on the ball.

Edmond protested that he didn't know where the musket ball came from. "Unless he put it there just now when he started our little wrestling match."

"Liar, you started it," replied Lavoisin. "You were trying to slip something into my pocket when your sister stepped in to stop us."

Olivia looked puzzled. "What I can't understand is the second musket ball. Like most performers, Father had his set way of doing things. He'd mold a single musket shot on the afternoon before his act. Just the one. And afterwards he always bit into it with his steel teeth and gave it to the volunteer from the audience as a souvenir. He always kept the mold locked up in the suitcase with the blunderbuss."

Ganelon took out a pocket glass and examined the musket balls. Neither had teeth marks. But each bore the same small pimple of lead. He asked to see Gramont's suitcase. While it was being

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brought from the wings he went over and found the key ring in the corpse's pocket. Unlocking the suitcase, he examined the shot mold with his pocket glass. "This little pit on the inside of the mold tells us it made both pieces of shot."

Here Edmond and Lavoisin resumed their shouting and pushing. Castine followed them across the stage trying to calm them down.

Ganelon turned to Olivia. "Where did the trick blunderbuss come from?"

Olivia said, "An old magician saw Father's Stone Eater act and came backstage. He was selling off his props with a view to retiring. He said he had something he was sure Father would be interested in and offered to bring it around. I remember the night very well. It was the same day, two years ago, when our beloved Princess Matilda died. Father was working up in his office. He told us he was expecting a visitor. My sister-in-law Marie and I were sewing costumes for our production of *Le Roi Rigolo* when I thought I heard the sound of the front door closing. So I came out. The entranceway is illuminated by the stuffed boar's head on the wall next to the door. My brother Edmond found the thing in an antique shop and turned the tusks into gas jets controlled by a stopcock under the creature's chin. But the gas had been turned off.

"As I went for a taper to relight it, I heard an urgent knock. I opened the door and there was this old man with that suitcase and a beard down to his waist."

Ganelon sighed to himself. A long beard. A perfect disguise to conceal Gramont's smaller one, or Lavoisin's famous cleft chin, or Edmond's beardless cheeks.

Olivia continued. "In a thick German accent he told me he was expected. I asked him to wait while I relit the gas jets so he could see his way up. But when I came back he was already at the top of the stairs. He thanked me politely and disappeared into the shadows around Father's office. I heard him knock and Father's voice calling for him to enter."

"Did you see the man leave?"

"About a quarter of an hour later I heard steps on the stairs and the front door close."

Ganelon asked, "Was your brother Edmond in the house?"

Olivia thought for a moment. "In the early part of the evening, yes. He read out loud to us while we sewed. Then he got a message and went out. He didn't return until after the old magician's visit."

Here the police arrived in the person of Ganelon's old friend Inspector Boulin. He brought the man up to date, presenting him with the two suspects who both had opportunity and motive to commit the crime. He also added the possibility that Gramont had committed suicide. Then, because Boulin was an amateur magician and performed magic tricks for the children at the police

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Christmas party, Ganelon asked if he knew of anyone in the trade who caught a musket ball in his teeth.

Boulin gave a sad smile and nodded. "The Mystifying Manfred. A real old-timer who worked the German circuit. He was famous for that particular trick. But three or four years back old Manfred took his show on the road to Majikistan."

Ganelon understood. Magicians are not mere mortals. They never die. What they do is half a vanishing act and never come back. The trade called it going to Majikistan. Ganelon aways imagined Majikistan as a lofty country peopled by spangled ladies and magicians in formal wear, walking about trying to remember the other half of the magic spell which had brought them to the place, and Hindu boys in loincloths carrying coils of the same rope they had used to escape their cruel fakir masters, scrambling skyward and pulling the rope up after them.

Majikistan also reminded Ganelon of another lead that needed looking into. Leaving the case in Boulin's hands, he returned to the theater box for his hat and cane.

Back out on the street in front of the theater Ganelon heard a voice call to him from a waiting four-wheeler. It was Madame Barbeau. She asked about Lavoisin. When Ganelon informed her that he was being held for questioning by the police, she said in a distressed voice, "Oh dear, how terrible to see an old friend die like that. And now another old friend is suspected in his death. I am sure Lavoisin had no part in the killing. Quite, quite sure." Then she interrupted her monologue to ask, "May I drop you somewhere? I'm on my way home."

Ganelon's destination was only a bit beyond Madame Barbeau's apartment house. He accepted the invitation. As he entered the carriage he discovered she was not alone. "Have you met La Belle Flora's Monsieur Andersen?" she asked.

"I have not had that pleasure," said Ganelon, extending his hand to the man with the eye-patch sitting in the dark corner and receiving a firm handshake in return.

"I have invited Monsieur Andersen for a small after-theater dinner," said Madame Barbeau. "He leaves us for Paris this evening on the Midnight Direct."

As the carriage rolled along, she chattered on about her friendship with Gramont and Lavoisin, allowing Ganelon to turn his mind to the case at hand. Certainly there was one person who knew how the trick worked and could have molded as many musket shots as he wanted: the old magician who sold the blunderbuss to Gramont.

And who was this old magician? The business with the gaslight in the entryway suggested someone who was afraid that Olivia might see through his disguise. Was it her brother Edmond? Or Lavoisin? (Ganelon didn't believe that Pierre Gramont sneaked

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down the stairs wearing the old-magician disguise, turned out the gaslight, and knocked. Why put on a charade like that to sell himself a blunderbuss he already owned?)

Twenty years before, when Passe-Partout, San Sebastiano's most famous escape artist-magician, died during an underwater escape trick at the Aquarium, his widow had opened a pawnshop for the trade. Down-on-their-luck magicians from all over Europe came to her to borrow money, leaving the props they used in their acts as security. Of course, in case they died or failed to redeem the item, she required that they explain how the trick worked so that she could resell it. She had called her establishment Au Tombeau du Majikistan to indicate she would be as quiet as the tomb regarding any magic secrets confided to her.

Madame Passe-Partout's shop was located in one of San Sebastiano's underground arcades, colorful relics of the city's past. It stood between "Abracadabra," a magicians' outfitter whose motto was "*The* name to conjure with," and a novelty shop with a window filled with pillows that made rude noises, very realistic ink spills made of celluloid, death's-head scarf-pins with snapping jaws and flashing eyes operated by a Lilliputian galvanic battery in the wearer's pocket, and an entire table setting of crystal dribble glasses.

The pawnbroker's small window contained a variety of unredeemed items, including a scorched article of apparel labeled "Turnstone the Magician's Death-Defying Flaming Trousers Trick."

Ganelon rang the night bell confident he would not be disturbing her. A moment later she appeared in the doorway at the back of the shop, wiping her floury hands on her apron. Recognizing the detective, she opened the door to him.

Madame Passe-Partout's establishment fronted on two underground arcades, the one Ganelon was in and another in a food court specializing in baked goods. Several years back, when she found herself with a surfeit of doves and rabbits as pawnshops in the magic trade sometimes do, she had opened the second shop there to sell her most delicious meat pies.

A small, brisk, no-nonsense woman, she led Ganelon toward the back of the shop, which resembled a salesroom for five-day clocks or coffins, containing as it did all the larger magical props, into which one beautiful assistant after another entered to vanish or be sawn in half or pierced by swords.

Madame Passe-Partout's living quarters were located between her two shops. The living room smelled of her meat pies. The walls were covered with pictures of her husband and framed publicity lithographs showing him performing many of his feats of derring-do. The room's centerpiece was a formidable steamer trunk bound around by several lengths of rusty chain and an iron padlock now

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no more than a lump of rust.

As she spread a white linen tablecloth atop the trunk, she blew a strand of hair out of her face, glanced down, and told Ganelon, "When you're married to an escape artist you're never sure when he's going to take off. There's a peace in knowing just where he is." Leaving Ganelon to meditate on that, she went to the kitchen and soon returned with the teapot and cups.

Ganelon got to the point at once. "You loaned money to the Mystifying Manfred on his trick blunderbuss."

She gestured out to the shop with her shoulder as she poured the tea. "That's what I do."

"Awhile back you sold it to somebody local."

She repeated her gesture in the direction of the shop.

"I understand your reluctance to speak about your clientele," said Ganelon.

"My late departed," she said, kicking the steamer trunk affectionately, "always said that silence is the soul of the magic profession."

"I hoped you might make an exception and tell me about the purchaser."

"And why shouldn't I?" she asked. "That man was no magician. Not that he didn't try to act the part."

"Was it the long beard that gave him away?"

"That, too," said Madame Passe-Partout. "Magicians are always anxious to prove they've nothing up their sleeves. They don't walk around with a beard you could hide a bicycle under. But most of all, it was the playing cards. I always keep a deck on the shop counter. No magician can resist a deck of cards. They always want to show off the best they've got. 'Pick a card, dear madam. Now look at it and put it back in the deck,' et cetera, et cetera. It passes the time when things are slow. But this individual left the cards alone.

"He told me he'd seen the Mystifying Manfred's blunderbuss in the window the week before and hoped I hadn't sold it. I had not. I brought it out and told him the price. 'I'll take it,' he said without a quibble. When he paid me I showed him how the trick worked.

"Oh yes, and I gave him a copy of the patter that went with it. You don't sell the hanky without the panky. Old Manfred was so proud of the patter he'd worked up for his act he insisted on writing it out for me."

Madame Passe-Partout smiled. "Actually, it was pretty good stuff," she said. "Before he got to the blunderbuss part Manfred always assured the audience they were in no danger of being spattered with blood should he fail in this very dangerous trick and be killed. He explained that he used a musket ball that came from the lead mines of elfdom, lead that killed without leaving a wound. To illustrate what he meant, he would cock his thumb and point his index finger at a stooge in the audience. 'Bang!' he would say, and

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the stooge would fall out of his chair and lie there on the floor as if he were dead. Manfred would always wag his finger at any children in the audience and warn them not to try that at home."

Ganelon strode back down the center aisle of the Bijou Theater. Gramont's body had been taken to the morgue. Everyone else had been sent home except for Edmond and Lavoisin. Two of Boulin's men were watching over Edmond at one side of the stage while the inspector questioned Lavoisin on the other.

Ganelon heard Boulin ask, "Do you remember where you were on the evening of the day when dear Princess Matilda died?"

Lavoisin made a corrugated brow and thought for a moment. Then he said, "Yes, it comes back to me now. It was most unusual. I received an unsigned note telling me I would learn something to my advantage if I went to the Frascati Fountain at nine that evening. I went. I waited for thirty minutes. When no one came, I went back home. Most mysterious."

Boulin sighed. When he saw Ganelon coming up the steps to the stage he came over to meet him. Lowering his voice, he said, "A frustrating case. Did you hear what Lavoisin just told me? Edmond Gramont's story is identical, except he was supposed to be standing in front of Tabarin's jewelry store. It could be either of them."

"It was Lavoisin," said Ganelon without moderating his voice.

Lavoisin started to strike a pose of kingly denial, perhaps from a role he'd played while Ganelon was away in Heidelberg, for he did not recognize it. But the actor sagged abruptly and said, "The elf-shot business gave me away, right?" Lavoisin shook his head. "I knew I'd made a mistake as soon as the words were out of my mouth. But it was such a nice bit of business I couldn't resist using it." He made his hand into a pistol and held the index finger up to his temple. "Kids, don't try this at home," he said, adding a quiet "Bang."

"All right, let's not drag things out. Once I sold Gramont the trick blunderbuss I knew I could kill him anytime I wanted. That's when I started talking about merging the two companies. I guess I bit off more than I could chew trying to throw the blame on Edmond. Well, I've always hated them both, father and son. One stole my rightful place in the theater, the other my daughter."

Lavoisin held out his wrists for shackles and seemed disappointed that Boulin didn't even have handcuffs.

Ganelon started his walk home. Now, with the blunderbuss business behind him, he turned his mind to several other unusual occurrences in the past few hours, not the least of which was why he had arrived back at the Bijou Theater humming a Chopin berceuse. But not any berceuse. The same one La Belle Flora had played for her final encore at her Paris concert. Then he recalled

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that when he left Au Tombeau du Majikistan he had passed Madame Barbeau's apartment building just as the final notes of a piano piece were sounding through an open window. He also remembered that every time Madame Barbeau's carriage passed a streetlight Monsieur Andersen raised his hand or turned his head as if to block a clear view of his face.

Ganelon checked his pocket watch. It was a quarter after eleven. He hailed a cab and raced to Madame Barbeau's apartment. At Ganelon's request, the concierge followed him upstairs, where they found Madame Barbeau unconscious in a chair near the piano in her living room, a demitasse of drugged after-dinner coffee near at hand. The filigree ball in which she carried the Baghdad Rose was missing from the chain around her neck.

Ganelon rang for the maid and instructed her to put her mistress to bed without wakening her, if possible. But should she regain consciousness before he returned, the maid was to prevent her from leaving the apartment on any desperate search for her beloved diamond. "Assure her that Ambrose Ganelon is on the case," he said.

The Midnight Direct, a first-class train with three carriages, waited on Platform Two beneath the railway station's glass-and-steel roof. Ganelon walked the length of the train on the platform. Then he went back to a compartment whose lamp had not been lit. He got inside and took a seat by the window. In the opposite corner, he could see two trouser legs by the light from the platform.

"We don't have much time," he said in a matter-of-fact voice. "I expect you didn't realize that you were getting yourself mixed up in an old quarrel between my family and Duhamel Fong's, a rivalry which cannot end this side of the grave. You were warned, I am sure, that you must not look at the diamond. If you had, and the legend is correct, you would never have been able to surrender it to him. Nor would you give it to me as now you must."

Ganelon paused. In a moment a gold filigree ball was tossed from the corner darkness onto the seat beside him. He picked it up. "Thank you," he said, adding, "You must never practice this hobby of yours in San Sebastiano again." He took his hat and cane. "Another thing," he said. "I will inform the European authorities that I suspect Monsieur Andersen is their jewel thief. So Andersen must vanish. And since you were his employer, you must not be surprised if the police begin to take an interest in your movements. I rather think you will find the challenge exciting."

The train stood on the verge of departure. Ganelon rose and bowed to the corner. "Au revoir," said Ganelon as he backed out of the compartment. If La Belle Flora replied, her words were drowned out by the guards blowing their whistles and slamming the compartment doors. ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM YOUR FRIENDS

by Jutta Motz

Translated from the German by Barbara Stiner

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Siv had been dreading the day for a long time. But she still got a shock when Nonna Anna decided, a short while after the passing away of her husband, to move in with her grandson Kostas and his young wife.

In southern Europe it is quite common for surviving parents or grandparents to be accommodated and taken care of by the family rather than sent to a nursing home. Which means: The care is conveyed to daughters or daughters-in-law. Preferred are those members of the family who are homebound anyway because they are rearing offspring.

Nonna Anna's children and children-in-law were all middle-aged themselves, and all had jobs. So did Kostas, her eldest grandson. But his young wife promised to meet the requirements for nursing the old, since she was working at home. She did translations for some foreign newspaper nobody had ever heard of around here. Such may have been the old woman's reasoning when she packed her small suitcase and

We have used the Swiss flag for Jutta Motz's story, for the author has lived and worked in Switzerland for the past 25 years. She is, however, of German birth, and has a residence in Greece, too, where she spends her summers—and where this story is set. "Why not drop the question of nationality," she says. "I just feel like a European." Ms. Motz is an art historian and archaeologist, and worked for many years in publishing in Zurich. In 1995 she wrote her first novel; she now has three novels and many stories in print.

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the nine family pictures.

Thus Nonna Anna moved into the little house of Kostas and Siv, into a small room on the ground floor, just to the left of the stairs, intended as a nursery sometime in the future. At present, Kostas and Siv were using the room as their study. They vacated the room without complaining, moving the heavy desk, the computer, and all the paper upstairs, to install their office in the open gallery of the upper floor. They would have had to move anyway once a little one was on the way.

Nonna Anna turned out to be a gentle, patient, and in no way demanding woman, even if she did need nursing. She also proved quite tough in her suffering. She never complained, never requested anything, never bickered or quarreled—she was just there. Also she never showed any disapproval of Siv's cooking, although most of it did not agree with her. Siv used many recipes she had learned from her mother, and these were Scandinavian specialties, all of which tasted horribly foreign to Nonna Anna. Bravely she sampled all that Siv put on her plate, but only small bits of everything. She understood that Siv was cooking the way she was used to from her mother, but it irritated her that her grandson Kostas seemed to like that strange fish food. Perhaps, Nonna Anna thought, this was because he had grown up near the sea, while she had remained in the interior of the country all her life, cultivating a small farm together with her beloved Vassilis.

In the course of the first year she continually lost weight, so that Siv began to get a local dish for lunch from the restaurant on the corner for her ward. With so much tender attention, and very proud of the special position she no doubt had in the house of her grandson, Nonna Anna recovered, and in spite of the hardship of having to move from her own home, and the stressful acclimation to the unfamiliar surroundings, she prospered. Sweetly smiling, she sat in her armchair every morning and, after an extended nap, in the late afternoon, of course supported by soft pillows. From the garden she watched what was going on in the village.

The villagers, who had in secret predicted only a short life for Nonna Anna in her new environment, noticed with amazement how the old woman, in spite of her eighty-two years, adjusted to her surroundings, and how lively and animated she was in responding to visits. Soon, one or the other of the neighbors came to keep her company when Siv was out shopping, discussing some translation with her editor, at the hairdresser's, or just swimming her daily round. When Siv returned, she quite often would find some tomatoes or fruit, a bar of homemade olive soap, or a piece of cake on the kitchen table, gifts the women of the village had brought for Nonna Anna. They used to deposit offerings for her in the kitchen so that they would not be nibbled by ants or stolen by cats.

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The women of the village wondered how it was possible that Nonna Anna was living so long, in spite of her increasing fragility. They would utter sounds of pity for Siv and Kostas, who took on the heavy work without demurring, bathing the old woman or driving her to the doctor. And the burden this must be on the young marriage was not discussed in confidence, no, quite openly—but not in the presence of Nonna Anna, of course.

A year had passed already since Nonna Anna had moved in with her grandson and his wife. Her posture, or rather, her manner of sitting—for in the time that had passed she had become bound to a wheelchair—showed a newly acquired self-confidence, and one day she proclaimed: "I wish to duly celebrate my decision to come and live with you. I want to invite all my friends for coffee and cake."

All the women of the village showed up for this battle of the cakes, all those who were no longer or never had been working. Kostas had bought a number of colorful cakes and had them decorated as for a child's birthday party. For three hours, Siv was making coffee and serving sweet liqueur whose slight smell of anise made her feel sick. When she had to lean on the wall for a moment, the sympathetic and knowing looks of the women met her, intensely scrutinizing her waist.

"I was sick from the beginning," said seventy-four-year-old Maria, and the other women nodded, nudging each other and giving Siv an encouraging smile.

Before the situation became more embarrassing, Kostas came home. He had taken off a few hours from his job to bring a bouquet of flowers to his grandmother. The old woman had never received anything like this before. "I feel very comfortable here with you. I think I might live to be ninety," she said, proudly enjoying all the attention.

There was an awkward silence. The women were looking at each other; some were shaking their heads as if the old woman had made some indecent request, others just shrugged resignedly.

"We have to help Siv," Georgia suggested. Out of the whole group, only eight women were still sitting in the garden instead of having gone home to prepare supper for their families. They did not have to debate long to determine what this neighborly help should look like. They decided to bring a plate with food to Nonna Anna every day, for lunch and for supper—this would be no great effort, since all of them were cooking generous quantities anyway.

Nonna Anna eagerly accepted this suggestion and thanked her new friends, who returned to their own homes with packages of leftover cake.

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Siv did not quite understand what this proposed help was supposed to mean, but Kostas explained it to her. While she had been occupied with the coffee machine in the kitchen, Nonna Anna had apparently told her visitors—very casually—how her stomach and digestion were suffering from all that Scandinavian cuisine. She was having regular stomach pains. Oh, she did not mean to criticize Siv, she pointed out immediately, no one should say a word against Siv and the care she took of her. She couldn't have it any better, really, there was no match in the world for this lovely young woman.

Siv's first impulse was to hit out at her husband, since he had had the nerve to repeat Nonna Anna's words with such obvious amusement. But then Siv decided it was not the messenger who should be punished for bringing bad tidings.

In the following days, Siv fantasized going for a walk with Nonna Anna in her wheelchair, to the high cliffs on the northwestern coast. When they got there, she would let the woman enjoy the grandiose view and then discharge her into the sea. This solution would have the indisputable advantage that the body would be carried out into the open water in the wake of the waves. There would be no burial, and Siv would not have to worry about having to clean the bones when after three years the remains were transferred to the ossuary—an honor bestowed for centuries on the women of the family, but which Siv would gladly forfeit.

Fed by the entire neighborhood, Nonna Anna visibly gained weight and strength. Siv's waist also grew round, and she got a lot of stupid and superstitious—as well as important—advice. But Georgia was the only one to ask the decisive question: "Where are you going to put the baby?"

Siv shrugged. She really didn't know. The nursery was occupied, and the gallery was used as their office. "In our bedroom," she decided, because she couldn't think of anything better.

"But that is no solution in the long term," Georgia declared wisely.

In the fall, when Nonna Anna was recovering from a bad cold, she said she would like to eat one of the simple dishes from Georgia's "witch's kitchen," as Georgia used to call her old-fashioned cooking area with the chimney above the stove. Here she roasted the meals that gave her a reputation as a chef far beyond the boundaries of her village. Probably the requested dish reminded the old woman of past, better times. Georgia hurried to comply. Siv set out a tray, put a nice place mat on it, got a new napkin from the cupboard—she wanted the old woman to enjoy her first meal after the high fever she had had.

"Feta Saganaki," Georgia announced when she carried, hands protected by potholders, the requested dish, in its pot, to the bed of

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her neighbor. Siv had opened a bottle of red wine, a mild 1998 from Nemea, ready to pour into the glasses. Georgia brought along an open bottle of red wine from Paros which would be better for Nonna Anna, she claimed. But she herself was curious to taste the wine from Nemea, new to her, and she praised its delicately sweet bouquet with a slight aftertaste of plums.

"Feta Saganaki and a glass of wine," Nonna Anna repeated with a yearning in her voice, looking forward to this tasty meal. While she was eating, she reminisced about the times when her own sheep and goats had been grazing around her little house. "Sheep and goat cheese, is there anything better in the world?"

The old woman ate slowly, tamping one mouthful after another of the melted cheese into her mouth, only a few teeth left sticking up like broken tree trunks after a fire. She mashed the soft pepper strips with her gums, making smacking noises as she moved the mild onions in position to be swallowed. Georgia and Siv sat by her side, each with a glass of red wine in her hand, and there were many toasts.

It was a very harmonious evening. The wine made Nonna Anna talk, and she was telling stories from way back. Every incident she could remember from the times of her youth and childhood was related.

Without anybody noticing, Nonna Anna had eaten up the contents of the bowl—of a size intended for two persons. She dipped up the spicy olive-oil sauce with fresh white bread before she allowed Georgia to take the bowl home. It may have been the wine that made Nonna Anna fall asleep almost immediately.

In the early morning hours, when the first light appeared behind the hills in the east, Siv woke up with a start. Was that not someone groaning in pain? She hurried downstairs to the room of the old woman, only to see blood running from her nose and mouth, the entire body writhing under the sheets. "Kosta! Kosta! A doctor!" Siv called.

The emergency doctor arrived forty minutes later and he, as was reported by the villagers later, ran from his car to the house of the patient with his heavy bag and an oxygen bottle.

Nonna Anna died before anybody could help her.

As soon as the news had gotten around, the neighbors came to help Siv with the preparations for the funeral. Georgia comforted the young woman, who was crying helplessly. She blamed herself when she saw that the linen of the old woman was soiled with bloodied feces. "She must have had a serious disease of the intestines," Siv lamented, guilt on her face. "Nonna Anna must have suffered horrible pain."

The emergency doctor passed by two more times that day to look after Siv; he was worried about the condition of the pregnant

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woman. He tried to calm her by saying, "She had a quick death."

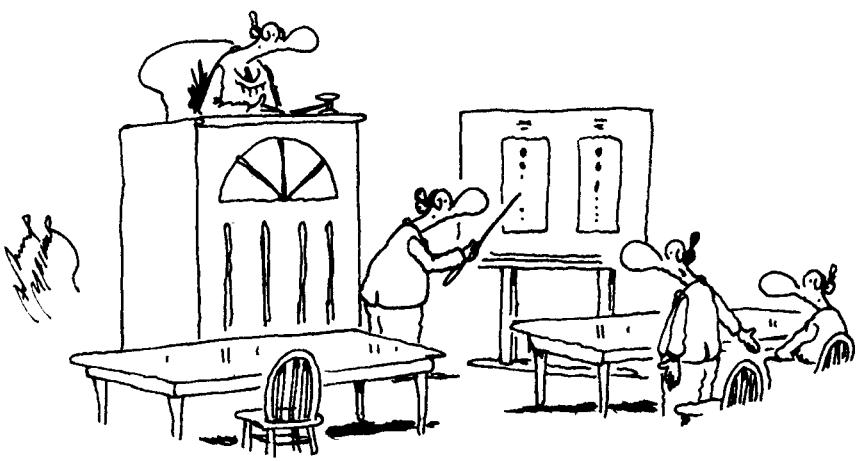
But Siv would not be comforted. She was afraid the stomach cramps of Nonna Anna had been the consequence of the Scandinavian fish cuisine. Had Siv not mocked her complaints and considered them whims of an old woman?

The entire village came to the funeral, and in the tavern afterwards everybody spoke well of the deceased. Her spirit and endurance in particular were emphasized. Siv felt more and more miserable.

A few days later, in the early evening, Siv went for a walk outside the village. She no longer had any obligations, she did not have to keep fixed times. She felt weary and full of guilt. She was walking through the meadows without any particular destination, without an eye for the beauty of the landscape. All of a sudden, an animal wail cut the quiet, where before there had been only birdsong and the chirping of crickets. Siv stood still and listened.

There, there it was again! That high-pitched, miserable sound. A few steps away, under a bush, lay a contorted cat, shivering on the ground. The animal was in a deplorable state. The fur was shaggy and wet, the eyes clouded and feverish. Siv bent down to pick up the cat to bring it to the vet, but the animal had one more convulsion, a gush of light red blood came from its nostrils, it released a thin bloody excrement, and died.

"Rat poison," a deep voice said behind her. Startled, Siv turned around. The old shepherd Anastasias was stepping beside her, looking down on the dead animal. He was reputed to know how to treat animals with natural medicine. "Rat poison—every household has some of that stuff in the basement." ●



"The DNA tests aren't valid, Your Honor! My client is one of several clones."

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PROTECTVISION

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

A past *EQMM* Readers Award winner, Kristine Kathryn Rusch began her fiction-writing career in our sister genre, science fiction. Occasionally, science fictional elements appear even in her mystery writing. In this new tale, for instance, the product at the root of the story's mischief does not (as far as she knows) exist. Nevertheless, insists Ms. Rusch, the technology does exist, and could be developed at any time for the sort of purpose she describes. . . .

Sharyn's clothes were spread across the backseat, turning red, then black, then red again in the flashing light from the dash. Rick still had his shirt on. He was groping for his pants, and not finding them. Each flash of red caught him in a different position—upright, looking terrified; bent at the waist, looking panicked; on his knees, looking as if he was going to burst into tears.

Sharyn's heart was pounding, but she wasn't going to panic. She wouldn't give her father the satisfaction.

She and Rick had parked near Enger Tower, deep in the park. Actually, she had parked up there. It was her car, her decision, her idea to seduce Rick on a cold October evening.

She was sixteen. She knew what she was doing.

Damn her father, anyway.

"Hurry up," she said to Rick, and he made a sobbing gasp. Maybe it wouldn't help to push him.

Methodically, she reached for her own clothes, bra first, then shirt—*in a sort of pants-less solidarity with Rick*—then underwear, socks, and jeans.

The light on the dash continued to flash. Its red blinking horrified Rick, but it didn't bother her.

What bothered her had been the voice, flat, androgynous, and official: *Illicit sexual activity between minors detected. Ignition has been disengaged. Car will remain sealed until authorities arrive.*

Sharyn had just discarded her underwear when that voice boomed. Rick had just flung his pants aside in reckless abandon,

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laughing at the way his penis had bobbed to life despite the cold.

There hadn't been sexual activity yet, at least not anything she would describe as real sexual activity, although she knew her father probably would argue that point.

Her high-and-mighty father, who liked to pretend he'd never had a youth at all. She knew if she found the right people, she would discover a whole new side to her dad, a side that would show him as the hypocrite he truly was.

She should have known, though. She had believed him when he said he was sorry for the names he called her, the way he tried to make her follow his beliefs, beliefs he knew she didn't share.

She should have known when her father bought her a present—a car, no less—that he wasn't forgiving her. He wasn't trying to please her. He had found a new, and even more creative, way to humiliate her.

"It's all twisted." Rick's voice hitched. He held up his pants-socks-underwear, which had become one big bundle.

Sharyn snatched it from him and started to untangle it. The material was still warm from his skin, which both excited and disgusted her. If she had realized he was this sensitive, she never would have brought him out here. Maybe it was a good thing they hadn't finished the act—as her father liked to call it. Rick would have been one of those guys who thought it meant something, who would want movies on Friday nights, exclusivity in the school halls, and maybe even a ring that held some kind of promise.

Sharyn didn't want rings and promises, certainly not from Rick. She didn't want anything more than a night of fun, away from the folks, the house, the church. All she wanted was to be her own person.

And her dad was doing everything in his power to prevent it.

The waiter had just set Walter Broome's grilled porkchop in front of him when his pager beeped. Walter's wife Irene shot him an annoyed look, but didn't say anything. She picked up her fork as if nothing had happened and poked the baked chicken she had ordered. She had learned long ago never to wait for Walter. His business took him away from the family more times than not.

The waiter left at the sound of the pager, whisking the tray away, navigating through the thin spaces between the tables. Other diners continued their conversations, and above the mahogany bar, CNN broadcast the day's headlines.

The porkchop smelled good, and the mashed potatoes above it looked fluffy and moist. The scents of butter and garlic rose from them, along with a slightly bitter odor from the beets that had their own separate plate so that their red juice wouldn't ruin the perfection of the meat.

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For one brief moment, Walter contemplated ignoring the page, shutting off the little gadget, and enjoying a quiet night out with his wife. But if he shut off the pager, his secretary would track him down. Her resourcefulness was the main reason he had hired her, and she would put it into play the moment she realized she couldn't find him.

Walter reached for the pager.

"Sorry, my love," he said to Irene, and the softness of his words took the pinched look from her face. When they had met in college, she had been a beauty—young, athletic, with round cheeks and a tall, graceful form.

The round cheeks were gone, as was some of the beauty, lost to long nights spent worrying. The lines beneath her eyes were frown lines, not laugh lines, and he always felt that was his fault. If he had been home more, less of a workaholic, less of a traditionalist, maybe she would have kept some of that softness that had so appealed to him when they met.

"It's all right, Walter," she said, and the sad part was that she didn't seem to mind. She was so used to his absences, even from promised events, that she always brought a PDA with her. She would check her e-mail or read a book or watch some television.

At least she was a traditionalist, too. At least she accepted that this was their lot in life, a lot they had built together.

At least she hadn't gone trolling for someone new.

Walter grabbed his pager and looked at the screen. Instead of the message he had expected, an update from his secretary or a colleague or his research partner, he saw *Call ProtectVision* with the number displayed below the message.

His heart lurched. He glanced at Irene, and felt the truth of the moment: Should he tell her or handle this on his own?

He was used to working on his own. But he had bought the ProtectVision more for Irene than for Sharyn. Irene hadn't believed their pretty sixteen-year-old daughter was promiscuous. When he had brought up the evidence—the e-mails Sharyn had gotten from boys, the phone calls, the slutty clothing she wore when she wasn't in her school uniform—Irene had laughed.

She's young, Walter. The teen years are an experimental time. We brought her up well. She'll make the right choices.

But Sharyn hadn't. She wasn't. She may have attended church at their side, and still did, every single Sunday morning, but she hadn't absorbed any of the lessons.

The one time he had tried to talk with Sharyn about abstinence and saving herself for marriage, she had wrinkled up her pug nose, so like his sister's, and had said:

Daddy, I got the birds-and-bees lecture years ago.

Walter had been a young man. He knew about the temptations,

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the lack of control, the raging hormones. He knew how vulnerable girls could be.

So, since his daughter refused to protect herself, he started to take steps to watch over her himself.

He just hadn't expected the ProtectVision to activate the first weekend she owned the car.

"Problem?" Irene asked. She understood him so well.

He made himself smile and attached the pager to his hip.

"Business," he lied, and in that moment the decision had been made. The ProtectVision made a video of the activity. It documented every movement from the moment the pheromones reached the activation level to shutdown of the car itself.

If the device worked the way the salesman and the literature claimed, Walter would have all the proof he needed. Irene wouldn't be able to deny the problems caused by her daughter's behavior, and maybe, just maybe, that all-girls school in New England would go back on the table.

"Do I ask them to keep your meal warm for you?" The question was perfunctory. Irene already had her PDA out. He was beginning to suspect she enjoyed her books more than she enjoyed being with him.

He wanted to say yes. He wanted to shut off the pager, forget he got the message, and spend the evening with his wife.

But his daughter was locked in a car somewhere with a teenage boy who hadn't learned how to control his sex drive. Walter had to leave.

"Have them bag it," he said. "I'll eat it when I get home."

Even though he and Irene knew he wouldn't. He would grab something fast and unhealthy on his way to wherever ProtectVision told him to go, and the food would rot in the refrigerator—like the memory of a quiet evening that never was.

Sharyn tried to start the car, but the key wouldn't even turn in the ignition. The light continued to flash—red, black, red, black—and it was making her dizzy.

The heat had dissipated from the interior, and the car was getting cold. It was supposed to go down to the teens tonight—the weather guys had predicted snow in time for Halloween (God, how she hated living in this hellhole!) and she didn't doubt it, not the way the air felt now.

Rick remained in the backseat. He was shaking and rocking back and forth, his arms wrapped around his waist. He had said something about panic attacks, but Sharyn hadn't listened. Panic never got anyone anywhere. If Rick was going to panic, she would have to be the one to get them out of the car.

And she would.

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The windshield was fogged from their breath and the heat of their bodies. Sharyn wondered how long they would be here, waiting for someone to find them. If the car got any colder, she would have to crawl into the backseat and put her arms around Rick.

The idea didn't sound as appealing as it had half an hour ago.

His breath was whistling in and out, and it sounded like he was getting a cold, like he had mucus in his throat.

Okay, she promised herself, this would be the last guy that she would ever, ever go out with before she got to know him. Rick had looked good and he had made her laugh, but if she had known he was this useless in a crisis—

"Shar?" His voice sounded strangled.

"The key won't turn in the ignition," she said. "I think the device shut everything down."

"Shar, I don't—" He gasped, a large whooping sound, and then choked.

She turned. He was patting himself down, as if he was searching for something. Quickly, panicked, just like he had before. His eyes were big and his face was a weird bluish color and he was making whoopy, gaspy noises that she had never heard before.

"What's going on?" she asked him.

His right hand went to his nose, his mouth, then his chest. The message would have been clear even if he weren't wheezing: He couldn't get any air.

Sharyn had ducked all her health classes. She thought sitting around listening to how to work the family defibrillator, which she had known how to do since she was three, was dumb. But now she was beginning to wonder what else she had missed.

"What do I do?" she asked.

He lifted a hand, mimed pressing something in front of his mouth. An inhaler. Of course. It would back up whatever drugs he was taking to keep his lungs open.

"You brought it, right?" she asked

He shrugged—or at least she thought he did—and then he started coughing so hard that it seemed like he was going to cough his stomach out.

She got scared then, more scared than she had ever been. She grabbed her cell phone and pressed the gold emergency button as she climbed into the backseat.

By then, he was rigid, his body bent in half, his eyes rolled in the back of his head. She felt every part of him for the inhaler, trying to remember what little she knew about asthma—inhalers were still used as last-ditch devices, and what had happened just recently? A group of kids dying because they forgot theirs? Something like that. Surely Rick wouldn't be that stupid, would he?

He was sweating, even though his skin was cold, and she could

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feel his heartbeat. It seemed too fast to her.

She had nearly patted all of him and found nothing when the emergency dispatch answered, and Sharyn was shocked at how calm her own voice sounded as she explained the situation, from being trapped in the car to Rick's inability to breathe.

She didn't feel calm. Her hand found the dome light, and as she talked, she patted the floor, searching for a device she had never seen before.

And all the while she talked, and Rick's eyes got bloodshot, and his gasps seemed even harder, and a horrible smell started filling the car, and Sharyn couldn't fight the feeling that somehow she was failing, somehow things would never ever be right again.

Sergio Kaplan was half an hour away from the end of his shift when he and his partner, Wren Connors, got the dispatch's call. He and Connors had been heading back to the garage from the west end of town, and the satellite tag had told the dispatch they were only three miles away from some emergency near Enger Tower Park.

The dispatch couldn't explain it all, just two teenagers trapped in a car, one seriously ill. Apparently an ambulance was on its way, but something in the initial contact had sounded suspicious and the dispatch wanted police on the scene as well.

Wren had made a face when she heard the call, but said nothing. They hadn't caught anything major in a week; Duluth got quiet when winter approached. Crime always took a hiatus in the cold.

Kaplan swerved the squad up Skyline Drive. He loved this vista at night. The city spread below him like a group of captured stars. The High Bridge, its halogen lights adding yellow to the display, glittered over the harbor, and on the other side of the bridge, Superior, Wisconsin, actually looked pretty, its impoverished homes and dying downtown hidden by the darkness.

Wren said nothing as they drove. She didn't like calls concerning teenagers. She had two at home, children of her middle age, and she took the troubles of others as if they were her own.

The squad struggled up a road that hadn't been improved for at least a century. Enger Tower Park was one of Duluth's premier tourist spots, complete with a golf course and a well-kept hiking trail, as well as stunning gardens in the summer. The park was built around Enger Tower, a tall old stone cylinder that had some historical value which Kaplan couldn't remember.

What he did know about the park was that it usually avoided trouble, except of the accidental kind—people falling from the tower onto the concrete sidewalk below; kids sliding down the

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graded hill toward the highway; the usual mess of trapped and exhausted hikers in the middle of the summer.

In the spring and fall, Enger Tower Park acted as Duluth's lovers' lane. Kids had parked there when Kaplan was young, just like they had when his father was young, and his grandfather before him.

Kids would probably park there until someone invented some other vehicle that was mobile and had enough room for sex. The park was quite secluded at night.

This night was no exception. The squad wound its way into the parking lot, which was, as he expected, empty. Even though cars weren't supposed to drive into the park itself, they did. Kids had been using the service roads for years.

Kaplan continued to drive, and Wren looked at him in surprise. She hadn't grown up here; she didn't know all the little byways that only teens would know. Sometimes she wondered where he got his information, and he didn't have the heart to tell her that teenagers had to learn things in the bitter frozen north or go mad.

A sporty late-model sedan was parked on the dying grass just off the service road. The windows were fogged up, much as Kaplan expected. What he hadn't expected was the red light that blinked on and off inside the car, illuminating a single thin form, female by the shape of it, although he couldn't really tell with the fog and the intermittent nature of the light.

The form rose up and down, moving almost violently against the seat of the car.

"You sure there's a problem here?" Wren asked.

"I don't know what that light is, do you?" Kaplan said.

A siren woo-wooed ever so faintly in the distance. He drove close to the parked car, so close that his headlights illuminated the back window. The car was mauve, and its Minnesota license plate matched the one dispatch had given him.

The figure inside stopped moving for just a moment, and then continued.

"I don't think they want to be interrupted." Wren's tone was dry.

He and Wren wouldn't be the first officers to answer a prank call at Enger Park, interrupting someone's night of fun. But usually, the kids stopped whatever they were doing the moment they realized the cops had found them.

Kaplan was familiar with those movements—the quick separation of two bodies, often with a head popping up from the seat below, the frantic struggle for clothing, the absolutely silly attempts at composure.

He thought it even odder that the people in this car didn't try any of those things.

He got out, slamming the door loudly in case the couple hadn't

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realized they had company. The person in the car continued her jerky movements.

Kaplan pulled his coat closed. It had to be down to at least 15 degrees up here, maybe less with the wind chill. And the car in front of him wasn't running at all. No matter how much body heat two people generated, they couldn't stay warm in a car on a night like this without the engine on.

He walked to the back window on the driver's side—which happened to be the direction the girl was facing—and knocked on it.

To his surprise, the girl didn't roll the window down.

The red light illuminated the interior again, but he couldn't see much through the fog. She had stopped moving, he could tell that much from her shadowy shape, but he couldn't tell anything else.

He knocked again. "Open the door!"

"I can't." The girl's voice was muffled and faint, but he could hear panic in it all the same. "We can't get out. The car just shut down and started broadcasting these warnings. Please, please get us out. There's something wrong with Rick."

That matched the report the dispatch had given Kaplan.

"Clear off the window," he said. "Let me see."

A hand splayed against the glass, then closed into a fist, wiping at the fog. Water ran down the glass.

Kaplan tried the door. It was locked. Wren had joined him. She tried the driver's door and got the same result. While Kaplan waited for the girl to finish clearing the window, Wren walked around the car, trying to find a way in.

Finally the hand quit moving, revealing a girl's face. She had an alarming beauty—upswept eyes, a small nose, and a rather wide mouth—but she also had uneven skin and round cheeks that would become sharper and more angular as she aged.

A less careful man would have thought she was in her twenties, but Kaplan had been a cop for a long time, and knew what to look for. That hint of baby fat and skin that required treatment to keep it clear marked this girl as a teenager.

She moved out of his view almost as quickly as she moved into it, allowing him a view of the interior. At that moment the red light flared. It was near the dash, and he thought he saw words, but he ignored them.

What caught his attention was the boy, sprawled on his back on the seat. His lips were blue, his skin unnaturally pale, and his eyes were rolled up in his head.

"Please," the girl said. She was huddled against the front seat, her feet on the divider in the middle. "Help us."

The sirens were closer now. Clearly the ambulance winding its way up the narrow road.

"Shit," Wren said from the passenger side. "Is this car coded?"

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"I don't know."

"What?" Kaplan asked.

"It's going to take a code to get them out of there," Wren said to him, looking over the top of the car.

Kaplan peered into the window again. "Do you know the satellite code?" he asked the girl.

She looked at him in confusion. "Please," she said again, "Rick can barely breathe."

They didn't have time to find a code or to explain to this girl how the car's safety features worked.

"Stay close to the driver's side," Kaplan said to the girl.

"But . . ."

He moved away, unable to hear her response. He went around the car, stopping at the passenger window.

"Go get a truncheon," he said to Wren. She nodded, heading back to the squad. For the first time, he was relieved to have the equipment so many cops in bigger cities believed was de rigueur. He'd never had to use his truncheon before, and certainly not in this way.

While Wren ran, Kaplan got out his service revolver. He removed the clip and stuck it in his pocket, not willing to shoot into the car. He had seen what kind of damage stray bullets did. Instead, he grabbed the gun by the muzzle and used the grip to pound on the passenger-side window.

It took three powerful blows before he even raised a crack. Then Wren returned with the truncheon. It looked black and menacing in the lights from the squad.

"Stand back," she said.

Kaplan moved away from the window.

Wren swung the truncheon like a baseball bat, and slammed it into the window. The crack Kaplan raised grew, but didn't shatter.

The girl cringed against the far door. The red light seemed brighter along the window's crack. Nothing else inside the car moved.

Kaplan's sense of urgency grew. Car manufacturers thought of ways to keep cars intact during an accident. They never considered what would happen when someone got trapped inside. Child locks and unbreakable windows had already made for one fatal accident that Kaplan had heard of locally; a sedan with three children inside missed a turn near the Duluth Arena Auditorium and went into the harbor. The mother was knocked unconscious, and the children tried to get out. But they were trapped in the backseat, unable to get to the front, unable to open the doors. It looked like the oldest child had tried to smash the windows and had failed.

Wren slammed the truncheon into the window again. This time,

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a small hole formed in the center of the crack.

"Almost," Kaplan said. He wanted to take a stab at it himself, but he knew better. Wren had adrenaline on her side.

She pounded the window one more time, and this time it shattered. Large pieces of glass tumbled inward, and a few fell onto the frozen ground.

Moist air, not exactly warm, smelling of panic, urine, and blood, wafted out of the car.

"Oh God," the girl said. "Get us out. Get us out."

She started across the seat, but Wren said, "Stay back."

Wren took the truncheon to the window, getting rid of the last of the glass. Then she reached inside, and tried to unlock the door by hand.

It didn't work, and Kaplan doubted that Wren expected it to. But they both understood panic, and they knew that at times, panic precluded the most common-sense actions. These two teenagers wouldn't have been the first two who thought they were trapped in a car when the child locks in the back had been activated.

The sirens sounded close, and then with a final whoop, they stopped. Kaplan heard vehicles pull up not too far away—probably in the parking lot.

"You can't get us out, either." The girl wasn't wailing, but her voice held that element, the element of terror.

Without the fogged window in front of it, the red light seemed violently red, like blood spilling across the upholstery every time the light activated.

Kaplan was standing at the wrong angle to see what device the red light was attached to.

"Position yourself," Wren said to him. "I'm going in."

It took him a moment to realize what she meant. She was going in to get the kid out all by herself. Her shoulders and hips were narrow; she'd make it through that small opening. Kaplan wouldn't.

He moved closer, to help her if she needed it, but she didn't need help getting into the car. She slithered through the window as if she'd been doing things like that all her life, her hands avoiding the large pieces of glass.

"What're you doing?" the girl asked. "We have to get out."

Wren fell across the front seat. "Stay calm, honey," she said. "You and I are going to get your friend out. Then we're going to see what we can do to save his life."

Walter pulled his Lexus into the parking lot at Enger Park. A squad car was parked haphazardly against the curb, as if someone had stopped in a hurry. The squad had its revolving lights on,

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sending surrealistic red light across the dying foliage and the naked trees.

Walter's breath caught. ProtectVision wasn't supposed to contact the police. It left those decisions up to the parents. Sometimes pressing charges got complicated—was it worth pursuing a statutory rape case when the boy was eighteen and the girl seventeen?—and the parent got the chance to decide what was best.

Walter had liked that feature of the system; it was one of the reasons he opted for ProtectVision, as opposed to AutoCarGuard, ProtectVision's closest competitor. But AutoCarGuard had theft and break-in features that Walter hadn't been interested in. This version of ProtectVision was designed specifically for concerned parents.

And he was concerned. More concerned than he had been. He was glad he'd decided not to bring Irene. She would have panicked when she saw the squad car, and he would have had to remind her that this was a public park. Things happened in places like this, things that the police still couldn't control, like drug sales and muggings.

Just because the police were here didn't mean they were here for his daughter. There was no way they could know that Sharyn was up here or that she and this horrible boy she was with were breaking any public decency laws.

He only hoped he would find Sharyn in another part of the park, away from the police.

Walter got out of his car. The air was frigid up here. What had Sharyn been thinking, coming to a place like this with a boy? She had no protection at all if something went wrong.

Walter shrugged on his winter coat, checking the pockets for his PDA. Then he shoved the car door closed. In the distance, he heard panicked voices—a man's shouting, someone else asking for calm, and a woman ordering other people out of the way.

The sounds were coming from the service road that led away from the parking lot. Walter peered down it, saw headlights illuminating more skeletal trees.

He swallowed hard, then picked up his PDA, using the satellite download to guide him to Sharyn's car. He looked at the illuminated map, then zoomed in and looked again. The red line indicating the most direct path to the car's location went across the service road in front of him.

Walter had been so convinced that Sharyn would be in the other direction that for a moment he didn't understand what he was seeing. Then he took off down that service road, running outdoors for the first time in decades.

The road felt strange after the uniformity of his NordicTrack, and he almost tripped over a fallen branch. His breath was coming

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in gasps, and it wasn't because he was out of shape. Walter stayed in shape—he always did, it was part of being prepared for anything. No. His breath was coming in short gasps because his heart was pounding, because his mind was racing faster than his legs, because the panic he always knew would hit him finally had.

Something had happened to his daughter. Something horrible, something he couldn't stop. Maybe the crazy boy she had been with had tried to abduct her and the car had somehow protected her, maybe even accidentally, when it got a whiff of his pheromones and knew that his intentions weren't good.

But that would mean she was locked inside the car with someone crazy, and it had taken Walter nearly forty-five minutes to get up to Enger Park. Which could be why the police were here and the ambulance. Someone had heard Sharyn cry out for help, someone had heard her scream, someone was trying to save her. . . .

He rounded the corner and saw a second squad car, its headlights on, but not its siren or its emergency lights. An ambulance was parked behind it, lights off, engine running, sending puffs of exhaust into the night sky. The ambulance's back doors were open, revealing a miniature hospital inside.

So far as he could tell, no one was inside. The paramedics were standing in the headlights of the squad. There was a medical cot between them. Both paramedics stood with their hands on the bed's rails, as if they were guarding it, waiting for instructions.

Exhaust swirled around the paramedics, making the light from the squad's headlights look a bit surreal. It was also tinged with red, but only faintly, only at odd moments, as if someone had left a blinker on.

When Walter realized what everyone was looking at, though, he tripped again. The headlights were focused on a purple sedan. Sharyn had a purple sedan; Walter had bought it especially for her, with the ProtectVision already installed, and he had told her, he had told her repeatedly, not to use the car for anything except driving, going from place to place. And maybe when she got older, maybe then she could take friends in her car, but until then, he expected her to be responsible, he expected her to know exactly what she was doing, and to behave like a girl who understood the world was dangerous, and she had to remain safe.

He had told her. And he thought she had listened.

"Balance. Steady." A man's voice spoke softly. "Keep steady."

Walter couldn't see where it came from. But there was a businesslike attitude to it, an attitude that worried him more than panic would have.

"Good," the man's voice said. "Okay. Almost. We almost have him."

The paramedics snapped into action, dragging their cot forward.

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It bumped along the grass, leaving a trail in the frozen earth. The metal rails reflected the headlights, sending flashes along the trees.

That snapped Walter forward, too. Someone was injured, and all these people, all these official people, surrounded Sharyn's car.

He hurried forward, stepping into the exhaust. A police officer in her heavy winter uniform stopped him with a hand to the chest.

"Sorry, sir, we can't let you past this point." Her voice was official. She was watching him as if he had a part in whatever had happened here.

"That's my daughter's car."

"Sir, this may not concern you."

"No," he said, shaking the PDA at the officer. "That's her car. It's locked. Let me get her out of there."

The paramedics came back, dragging the cot between them. They looked glum. Someone was on the cot, but Walter couldn't see who it was.

Walter pushed past the police officer. She no longer seemed to be trying to stop him. He got to the passenger side of the car in time to see Sharyn lever herself out. A male police officer caught her, then helped her to her feet.

Walter's breath stopped. He was relieved to see her, relieved to know she wasn't the one on that cot.

"Is that your daughter, sir?" the officer said from beside him.

"Yes," he said. His voice sounded tearful, which surprised him. "Yes, thank God."

"You mentioned that the car was locked. How did you know that, sir?"

"ProtectVision," he said, still not looking at the officer. He handed her his PDA, and then started for his daughter. But the officer caught his arm.

"What is ProtectVision, sir?"

"It just protects her," he said. "You know, from sex-crazed boys. It stops everything until help can arrive. It's a new feature to guarantee abstinence. You've heard about it, I'm sure."

"Abstinence," the officer said in an odd voice. "I guess, then, that it worked."

Sharyn's legs felt like rubber and she was suddenly very cold. She looked for Rick—shouldn't they have been doing those cardio things the way they did on vids? Shouldn't someone have been helping him? She didn't see it all clearly, but it looked like the paramedics had just loaded him onto that bed, and then carried him away, as if he wasn't worth their time.

The police officer who helped her out of the car, Officer Kaplan, wrapped a blanket around her. She didn't know where he got the blanket from, but she was grateful. It seemed colder out here than

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it had been when she and Rick left the dance.

Her breath made little clouds that floated away. She was shaking. Even with the blanket, she was shaking.

"Come on," Officer Kaplan said. "Let's get you to the ambulance. Let's make sure you're all right."

He wasn't going to wait for Officer Connors. Officer Connors who had given Sharyn that odd look inside the car. Officer Connors had nearly lifted Rick out of the backseat all by herself. Sharyn had helped some, but Officer Connors had done most of it, Officer Connors who was no bigger than Mother.

"I'm okay," Sharyn said. "It's Rick that needs the help."

Officer Kaplan gave her that same strange look, as if there really was something wrong with her, as if she had some booger hanging off her face or something.

"What's your name, honey?" he asked.

Officer Connors levered herself out of the car, climbing out the window as if she were getting down from a swing set. Officer Kaplan gave her a hand, helping her balance, but he never took his gaze from Sharyn.

"Sharyn Broome," she said.

"Ms. Broome."

There was something in his voice she'd never heard before, a tone, an attitude, something that really worried her. It was almost as if he was trying to talk to her as an adult, but wasn't sure if it was the right thing. Sometimes—most times—her dad used that tone with her mother, as if Mother wasn't quite able to take care of things on her own.

"Your boyfriend, Rick?" That part was a question, as if Officer Kaplan wanted to make sure she knew what he was talking about before he said another word.

"Yeah?" Sharyn asked.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Broome, but your boyfriend—he died in there."

Sharyn let the words roll around in her head for a minute. Died. Part of her had known that. His blue lips, the scary cough, the breathing. He was dead.

But he couldn't be. He had been laughing with her not two hours ago. They left the dance, and she drove him here, and—

She whirled, ran for the ambulance, her feet slipping on the frost-covered grass. The paramedics were loading the bed into the back, moving slowly, as if it didn't matter.

She stopped beside them, the air cold in her lungs. "Rick," she said, reaching for the black covering.

One of the paramedics caught her hand. "I'm sorry," he said.

She looked inside, saw equipment hanging from the walls, lights and computers and monitors, all beeping and on. "You can bring him back, right? I heard somewhere that people can come back if

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they're cold and not breathing. Right?"

"Children," the paramedic said. "Children who've fallen into icy water. Not young adults."

"I don't think he died from the cold," the other paramedic said. "He had asthma, right?"

"He never said." She didn't know anything about him except that he was cute and fun to kiss, and he made her laugh.

"No inhaler?"

His hand, scrinching, pointing. The fear on his face.

"I couldn't find one. He had me look for it, but I didn't find it anywhere."

The paramedic nodded. "I'm not sure it would have mattered. Sometimes, these things can't be prevented."

"They just happen?"

"Was he scared?" the paramedic asked.

Rick was laughing as he peeled off his pants. He smiled at her in the thin light, reaching for her—and then the alarm went off. The look in his eyes—all wide and startled, getting worse and worse as his breath got more and more choked.

"Yeah," she said. "I think he was."

"Severe emotion," the paramedic said. "Sometimes it makes the attacks worse."

She nodded, feeling numb. They loaded the bed into the back. The paramedic who'd been talking to her said, "We really should check you over."

"I'm fine," she said.

"You never know—"

"I know." She didn't want them touching her. She didn't want anyone touching her. Not yet.

She walked away from the ambulance, away from the car, unsure how she was going to get home. She didn't ever want to get in that car again. That gift from her oh-so-manipulative daddy. Someone had died in that car.

Rick had died, all because he had been with her.

"Sharyn?"

At first, she thought she imagined the voice. Her father's, speaking to her with that mixture of disapproval and worry, the only way he seemed to talk to her anymore.

Then she saw him, standing near the squad car, surrounded by exhaust. It almost looked like he was rising out of a white cloud, wearing a black suit. Should she tell him how much he looked like the Devil? The Devil masquerading as a good Christian man.

"Sharyn, honey . . ."

He didn't seem to have any words. Neither did she. What could she say to him, after all?

She stood her ground. He came to her, slowly, as if he wasn't

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sure of what she would do. She wasn't sure, either.

The police watched. This seemed to be a show to them. Or maybe, with a dead body, they would have to look at everyone with suspicion. They wouldn't blame her, would they? She did everything she could. They probably even had her voice on the 911 tape, sounding all panicked.

Her father stopped in front of her. He was so much taller than she was, and broad-shouldered, but in shape because "God gave us bodies we have to take care of." The sole argument he had against her. He had never trusted her, never believed she would do the right thing.

So finally, she gave up and decided to do what she wanted. There was no pleasing him anyway.

He was looking at her with a slight frown on his face. In his left hand, he clutched his PDA. He had no reason to have his PDA out, unless it brought him here.

She snatched it from him, saw the map, showing him where the car was. Then she pressed the back button, saw the messages from ProtectVision.

"You did this on purpose," she said. "You planned to catch me doing something wrong."

"I hoped you wouldn't, honey," he said. "I hoped we'd never use this."

"Hoped," she said. "But you bought it anyway because you didn't trust me."

"You don't understand boys, Sharyn." His voice was soft. "You don't know what they can do—"

"Yes, I do, Daddy," she said quietly. "They can die."

Then she dropped his PDA. It tumbled in the thin air until it hit the grass, bouncing once. She studied him for a moment, as if daring him to pick it up.

Walter didn't know what to do. He'd seen his daughter angry thousands of times, but never like this. Her anger ran to heat—screams, threats, histrionics—it was never this cold, this rational.

This frightening.

"You killed him, Daddy," she said. "Just as sure as if you pulled a trigger. These police might not be able to do anything to you, but that doesn't matter. You and I both know."

"You're just as guilty, little girl. If you hadn't brought him here—"

"I didn't know about your ProtectVision! If I had known, I wouldn't've used my car. I trusted you, Daddy, even if you never trusted me. I thought that car was a gift, a peace offering. But it was just a big lie."

She put her foot on the PDA and smashed the screen with her heel. The equipment crackled as it fell apart. All of his information, much of his life, was on there.

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"We're done," she said. "You and me. I'm going to Grandma's, and you're not going to come get me."

"Sharyn—"

"It ends now," she said. "Any relationship we had. It's done."

Then she walked away from him, over to the small female police officer. The officer looked at her with compassion, put an arm around her, and led her back to the ambulance.

Walter stood in the grass, his feet getting cold in his thin-soled shoes. The remains of his PDA littered the ground in front of him. Around him, voices echoed, discussing the car, the ProtectVision, the suits the company would face when this hit the news.

But he didn't care about any of that. All he cared about was his daughter walking away from him.

He knew she was right. It did end here, just as it had started here, sixteen years ago. In the backseat of his father's car. With Irene.

Irene, who had been crying.

That's what he remembered. How she cried. And how he hadn't cared because of that feeling running through him, so new, so different.

He had tried to tell Sharyn about boys. He knew about them. He had been one of them.

ProtectVision wouldn't have stopped him from trying that night. But it would have stopped the rest of it—Sharyn's conception, the wedding, the marriage itself.

He had just been trying to protect her.

To save her, from himself. ●

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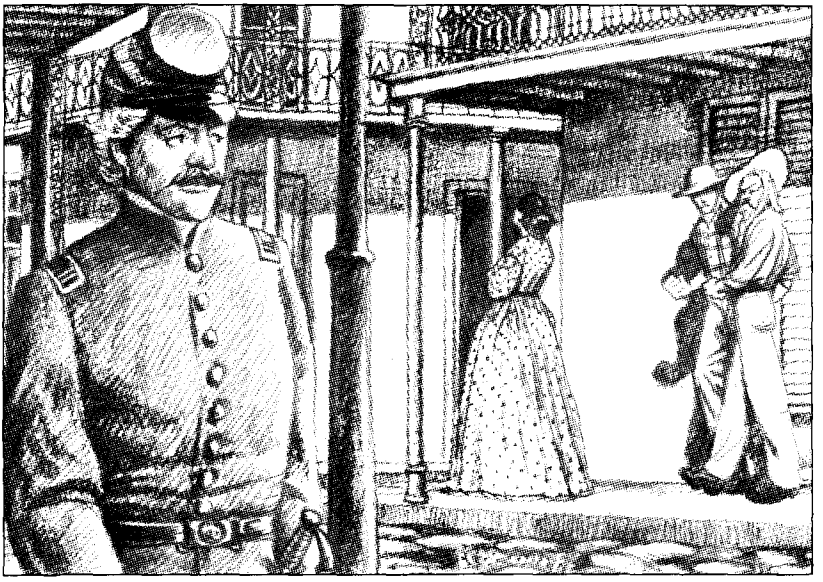

Art by Jason C. Eckhardt

General Order No. 28

by O'Neil De Noux

The accused murderer stood in the holding cell of the old Calaboose, the same jail the French and Spanish had used here in New Orleans, her arms folded, her face half hidden in shadow. I could see her eyes shining in the dimness as she stared back at me. She'd been standing for hours. There was nowhere for her to sit in that hoop skirt.

"Get a stool in here," I called back to the sergeant-major.

"A stool?"

"How is she supposed to sit?" I said louder.

The sergeant-major, a burly Irishman with a handlebar moustache, stepped in with a stool and apologized to me. "Sorry, Cap'n. I thought she could sit on the bunk."

"Don't apologize to me. Apologize to her."

The sergeant-major unlocked the cell door and took in the stool.

"Sorry, ma'am." He doffed his campaign hat and hustled out.

"Leave it open," I told him, taking out my notebook and pencil and noting the time and date: ten P.M., Friday, August 29, 1862.

"I'm Captain Jason Bartlett." I looked at her eyes. "I'm with

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the provost marshal's office."

She took a hesitant step forward, lifted the back of her skirt, and sat on the stool. She was younger than I expected, even younger than I, and I'd just turned twenty-three. Her long brown hair was pulled back in a black net. Her purple dress wasn't of the finest material, nor the latest fashion, but I'd never seen anyone more out of place in a jail cell than Anne Carmaux.

It was almost cool inside the jail, although it was still steamy outside, even at night. It was the jail's dampness, I suspected. I took in a deep breath of stale air that reeked faintly of mold and asked if there was anything she needed. She blinked her brown eyes but did not respond. As my eyes adjusted to the light I could see that her face was lovely, very lovely, as she sat there staring at me. She was a typical dark-haired daughter of this old Southern city, a city more European than American, even as we struggle through this war.

Wartime settings present special problems for mystery writers and their sleuths. The absence of normal civil authority, the suspension of some laws and the instatement of others, chaos that allows evidence to be concealed—all these things seem to favor the criminal over the detective. In O'Neil De Noux's new story, all such obstacles are overcome by a persevering Union Civil War captain who finds himself investigating homicide under martial law. . . . ¶

"I understand your husband has been notified," I told her, and she closed her eyes and let her chin sink.

"Do you have children at home that need attending, ma'am?"

She shook her head, and I was finally convinced she understood English. You never knew in New Orleans. Carmaux was a French Creole name.

"You know why you're here?" I asked, stepping into the cell's doorway but staying outside. Better than looking through bars at her. "You've been arrested for the murder of a U.S. Army officer."

She sat up straighter, but said nothing.

Voices echoed from outside and I knew the crowd was growing.

"Ma'am, I need your side of the story. If you're innocent, tell me. If the act wasn't premeditated . . . on purpose, tell me."

She sat motionless.

I called the sergeant-major back in to lock the cell, then stepped with him into the desk area of the Calaboose, where three guards, in various states of leisure, lounged in their blue uniforms. They slowly came to attention and I told them to wait outside, but not to get the crowd started up.

"She hasn't said a word," the sergeant-major told me. "We identi-

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fied her from this." He handed me a Catholic Bible. Her name was inside the front cover with an address on Dauphine Street.

"Her husband's a blacksmith," the sergeant-major added. "He headed straight for a local priest when we told him."

I took off my hat and laid it on the desk, and straightened my dark blue tunic. At six-two, I towered over the sergeant-major as he stood at attention in front of his desk. I was much thinner, however, my blond hair cut short, as was my moustache, not hanging around the sides of my mouth as was the current fashion.

My leg started acting up but I resisted leaning against the desk. Although my wound had healed, the Rebel bullet that broke my right femur at Bull Run left me with a slight limp.

"Sar'nt, I understand the victim was in here just before he was killed?"

"Yes, sir. Lieutenant Langford brought three ladies in here for violating General Order Number Twenty-Eight."

"Mrs. Carmaux was one of these ladies?"

"No, sir."

I had to sit, so I moved around the desk and sat in the sergeant-major's chair.

"At ease." I put my notebook on the desk and jotted down what he'd told me so far. "What's your name, Sar'nt?"

"Samuel Jeffries, sir."

I asked him to relate the evening's events as they had occurred.

He cleared his throat. "A little after five o'clock, Lieutenant David Langford comes in, dragging three women with him. He says they spat on him as he passed them on Royal Street and so he arrested them under the general's order." The sergeant-major leaned forward. "Lieutenant Langford said he was on General Butler's staff, sir."

I nodded as I continued writing.

"Well, Cap'n. Lieutenant Langford is fit to be tied, sir, and orders me to put the ladies in a cell. Well, sir, I explained to the lieutenant that there's nothing in General Order Number Twenty-Eight about *arresting* women."

He was right, of course. The damned, infamous order just said that a woman who directed scorn on army personnel was "to be treated as a woman of the town plying her avocation."

"So I told him I couldn't put them in a cell, sir." He cleared his throat again. "The ladies were a minister's wife, her daughter, and a woman who owns a dress shop on Royal Street. I took their names and addresses and released them."

"How did Lieutenant Langford react?"

"He took my name and said I was to be court-martialed for disobeying a superior officer." Jeffries stiffened as he added, "I argued with him, sir. On purpose, to let the ladies get a head start on him

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before he stormed outta here."

This was one brazen fellow.

"Where did you fight before coming here, Sergeant-Major?"

"Bull Run and Williamsburg, sir. With General Hancock."

I went back to my notes. "Sar'nt, you said Lieutenant Langford was 'fit to be tied.' Had he been drinking?"

"Yes, sir. He had a flask in his tunic and drank more here. He was drunk, sir. My men will tell you so."

"Your word is good with me, Sar'nt." I straightened my leg beneath the desk and twisted a kink out of my back. "How long after the women left did Lieutenant Langford leave?"

"Less than five minutes. Only a minute or two after he left we heard the shot. Me and the boys run out and found the lieutenant in the alley that runs alongside the cathedral. He was up close to Royal Street. Already dead. The boys found Mrs. Carmaux near the front of the alley."

It took a minute for me to catch up with my writing before I asked, "What did she say?"

"Nothing, sir. We found the gun in her purse." Jeffries pointed to a table behind his desk and I turned to find a purple purse and a two-shot derringer. I opened its breech and found one shot had been fired. I sniffed the barrel. It smelled of gunpowder but not like a recent discharge.

"This hasn't been fired recently."

Jeffries looked right into my eyes and said, "I sniffed it, too, but she was the only one around, sir, and there's a bullet missing."

Returning to my notes, I asked for the names of the ladies detained by Lieutenant Langford. Jeffries provided me with a list of names and addresses. I asked him to step back into the cell area and called his men in one at a time and questioned them. Their stories were identical.

As I was getting ready to leave, the runner I'd sent earlier to the Hospital Corps returned with a nurse. I gave my orders.

"I'll have a carriage sent to move Mrs. Carmaux to the hospital prison ward. Meanwhile," I pointed to the nurse, "you will sit outside the cell of the accused and watch over her."

I could see Jeffries was more than relieved to have Mrs. Carmaux taken off his hands.

"Now, Sar'nt, show me where the body was found."

Jeffries led me out of the Calaboose along the alley running from St. Peter Street to the alley alongside St. Louis Cathedral. The alleys, like the streets, were sunken from the sidewalks, which they called banquettes because they served as banks when the streets flooded, which they did with even the slightest rain. And rain in New Orleans was usually heavy, very heavy.

There was still a spot of blood where Jeffries was found.

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"Sar'nt, did you speak to any of the other people who came out to see what happened?"

"There were no other people about, sir."

I looked at Royal Street and realized the normally busy street was void of life, except for us soldiers.

For the next hour we searched both alleys. Not sure what I was looking for, I checked the locked doors of several shops and the door at the side of the cathedral. The alleys smelled of stale beer and faintly of urine. I checked the drains and trash bins with the sergeant-major's help, but we came up with nothing, except uniforms caked in sweat. I remember thinking my Monroe County, Michigan blood would never get used to the thick, sweltering nights in the deep South.

On my way to the morgue at Charity Hospital, as I rode in the back of the hansom, I wondered if Sergeant-Major Jeffries was wily enough to have put a bullet in Lieutenant Langford to avoid the threatened court-martial, and his men gladly covered up for him. It was a possibility; however, there was something in Jeffries' manner that made me feel he told the truth. A man who'd stood under the withering fire at Bull Run and Williamsburg needn't fear a drunk lieutenant, even one from General Butler's staff, especially a greenhorn as useless as Langford.

I'd met Langford, at parties mostly, and if any officer in New Orleans was incendiary enough to provoke a woman to kill him, he would be my choice. He could have staggered out of the Calaboose, come upon Anne Carmaux, and provoked a response he wasn't expecting.

Then again, speculation would solve nothing.

The morgue was in the basement of Charity Hospital. In New Orleans, that meant the first floor, beneath the steps heading up to the main floor, because there were no real basements in a city built below sea level, a city with a water table not two feet beneath the surface.

The naked body of Lieutenant David Langford lay on a raised autopsy table in the center of a small room that had no windows. The room reeked of strong chemicals and blood. Standing over the body was a man in a gray smock, knife in his left hand.

"Excuse me, I'm from the provost marshal's office."

"Dr. Maurice. I'm the parish coroner. I suppose you're here to get the bullet."

I stepped closer as Dr. Maurice pointed to the small hole in Langford's chest.

"Heart shot," the doctor said as he began his dissection of the body. He extracted the bullet from Langford's heart, cleaned it off,

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and passed it to me. I took a deep gulp and my heart began to race immediately. Even a layman could tell this bullet wasn't fired from a derringer.

I nervously pulled out Anne Carmaux's gun and removed the remaining cartridge. Dr. Maurice stepped over and shook his head.

"Didn't come from that gun," he said.

I kept my nine A.M. appointment with General Butler, arriving ten minutes early after a close shave and a change into a fresh uniform. The bright morning gave promise to another sweltering day. The great four-story St. Charles Hotel served as Butler's headquarters. Passing beneath its towering cornice, supported by tall, fluted Corinthian columns decorated at their zenith with acanthus leaves, I kept thinking about Anne Carmaux standing for hours in that cell. At least the hospital prison ward was more a hospital than a jail. The Calaboose was little better than a torture chamber where the French and Spanish had dealt out their harsh punishments—fifty lashes for thievery, fifty lashes for blasphemy, one hundred lashes for "crimes against the Crown."

In the St. Charles, I caught the smell of pine-scented cleaner as a black workman mopped the marble floor under the high, vaulted ceiling. My boots echoed as I moved to the door of the suite used by General Butler. A bored-looking guard let me through without the slightest challenge. A prim, balding lieutenant with thick spectacles looked up from his desk as I stepped in.

"You must be Captain Bartlett." The lieutenant rose quickly and turned to a set of double doors. "The general's expecting you."

He knocked on the door and a muffled voice spoke beyond it. He opened it for me and stood aside.

The room was spacious enough for voices to echo. I walked a good fifty feet across a fine Persian rug, through two sets of cushioned chairs, to be greeted by two majors.

I knew Major Dover from General McDowell's staff at Bull Run. Dressed in an impeccable uniform, including an elegant yellow sash, Dover was almost as tall as I and nearly as thin. His black moustache was full and draped around his mouth, and his hair worn long, past his shoulders. He nodded at me and smiled slightly.

I'd met Major Prentiss at one of General Butler's parties. A gruff man, short and stocky with coarse brown hair cut short, he glared at me as I stepped up. His uniform was rumpled as if he'd slept in it.

I continued past the majors, up to General Butler's desk, and saluted smartly. The general, in his usual dress uniform, dual rows of gold buttons running down the front of his tunic, two silver stars on each round shoulder, sat behind a huge mahogany

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desk. He was reading a newspaper and didn't look up as I held my salute.

A plump, toadish man, Butler was bald except for a swatch of thick black hair around the back of his round pumpkin head. He wore whiskers along the sides of his face—"burnsides," we called them, since General Burnside had made them fashionable—and had a handlebar moustache.

"What's this about women arrested for violating my order Number Twenty-Eight?" Butler's voice was high-pitched, squeaky, and a source of amusement to those of us who had accompanied him since he first occupied New Orleans back in the spring.

He looked up at me and finally returned my salute. I resisted looking at his eyes, which were crossed, so that I never knew which one to look at.

"Lieutenant Langford arrested three women last night, before he was killed, and brought them to the Calaboose. . . ."

Butler slid a leather folder toward me and pointed to it. "Pick that up and read it aloud."

I recognized it immediately. It was the original signed order, one reproduced and tacked up all over this town, the largest city in the Confederacy. I had it memorized but read it anyway.

General Order No. 28

Headquarters, Department of the Gulf
New Orleans
May 15, 1862

As the officers and soldiers of the United States have been subject to repeated insults from the women (calling themselves ladies) of New Orleans, in return for the most scrupulous noninterference and courtesy on our part, it is ordered that hereafter when any female shall, by word, gesture, or movement, insult or show contempt for any officer or soldier of the United States, she shall be regarded and held liable to be treated as a woman of the town plying her avocation.

by command of Major-General Butler
Geo. C. Strong, A.A. General, Chief of Staff

"Now," Butler leaned back in his chair. "Where does it say anything about arresting women?"

I shrugged and wondered why he was blaming me.

"Dammit to hell," the general continued, "now I've got to write a letter to Langford's mother explaining how her son, one of *my* orderlies, was killed."

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Major Prentiss came up and snatched the general's order out of my hands.

"Damn Rebel generals are still reading this to their troops. Getting everyone riled over this . . . trifle."

I glanced at Major Dover, who shook his head as he pulled out a cigar to light. General Butler's infamous order was so incendiary it had already been denounced as far away as London. The British Parliament had declared it "unfathomable" how a man belonging to the Anglo-Saxon race could concoct such a decree.

The Rebel newspapers played it up big, of course. One paper went as far as to call us crybabies: We can't beat their armies and are having a helluva time trying not to be beaten up by their ladies.

"Everybody knows the damn Rebel women are the most ardent Confederates," Prentiss continued, getting a nod from Butler.

There were times when I missed the sting of battle, the smell of gunpowder, the groan of cannons, the bark of musketry. I had no death wish, but this occupation was—unmanly.

Butler raised a hand and focused his eyes on me, or at least in my direction, as he said, "Tell me about this Secesh woman who killed my orderly. She was one of the women he arrested?"

"No, sir."

"No!" Again, the accusing voice. "Then where the hell did she come from?"

A good question. Where had Anne Carmaux come from before she was apprehended in that alley? I made a quick mental note to find out.

"She was nearby, sir, when the shot rang out, but I'm going to release her as soon as I get back to the hospital prison ward."

"Hospital?" Butler almost fell out of his chair.

"Release?" Prentiss jumped as he stood next to me.

"What the hell is the meaning of this?" Butler stood up, his head rising a half-foot at most.

"The derringer she was carrying was not the murder weapon."

"The what?" Butler shoved his fists against his abundant sides.

"The bullet that killed Lieutenant Langford didn't come from the gun the woman was carrying."

"That doesn't mean she didn't kill him," Prentiss argued. "She could have hidden the gun before she was arrested."

"We searched the area carefully."

Prentiss huffed and opened his arms to General Butler, who sat and cleared his throat before speaking.

"You will not release the woman. Not immediately. Until you are *certain* she did not kill my orderly. Understood?"

"Yes, sir." I felt my face flush as I stood there listening to General Butler and Major Prentiss berate what the Southerners call

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the Second American Revolution, as if anyone in the room needed convincing of the righteousness of our cause.

"The Union must and shall be preserved!" Butler boomed.

I couldn't have agreed more. The more the Rebel papers, especially the respected local paper *The Daily Crescent,* talked about preserving Southern traditions, fighting for Southern independence, the more I got fired up remembering their most famous tradition. Slavery.

No one needed to convince me the Confederacy was a bad idea.

Listening to Butler and Prentiss rail against Secesh women, it occurred to me that the real killer must feel he or she was safe with Anne Carmaux in custody. Maybe I could use that. It also dawned on me how much work I had ahead of me.

Finally, General Butler tried to focus his crooked eyes on me and said, "I'm depending on you, Captain. Let's put your legal training to good use. Dismissed."

Legal training? I was a line officer, an infantryman, sent to the provost marshal's office to recover the strength in my leg. I slowly saluted and tried my best not to limp as I moved through the chairs. For a moment I was back on that damn hill, going up against strong Rebel defenses. We called it Bull Run. They called it Manassas. The position we attacked was held by General Jackson, where the man earned his nickname, Stonewall. It was like running into a wall of lead and bayonets. The memory of the sulfurous stench of gunpowder still lingered in my nostrils, along with the tangy smell of blood.

Stepping out of the general's office, I wondered how I could make Anne Carmaux's stay at the hospital ward more comfortable. That was the least I could do for her.

Butler's bespectacled lieutenant cuffed me as I left. He beckoned me aside and said, in a low voice, "There's a priest and a nun outside in the hall insisting on speaking with the officer in charge of the prisoner." He wiped his brow with the back of his hand. "Failing that, they insist on seeing the general."

Stepping into the hall, I almost bumped into the priest as he stood with his hands behind his back. He wore a long black robe and the familiar Catholic collar. He took a step back and the nun came into sight. Her black habit was crowned with a small covering around her head, framed in white that extended across her shoulders.

"I'm Captain Jason Bartlett. I understand you're here about Mrs. Carmaux."

The priest was tall, with deep-set brown eyes, a square jaw, and a nose that had been broken once, maybe twice. He introduced himself as Monsignor Toulon of St. Mary's and the nun as Sister Marie from the Ursuline Convent. I heard them out, let them ask

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what they wanted, and almost smiled at their solution to one of my problems.

"Yes," I said, surprising them completely. "I will release Mrs. Carmaux to the Ursuline Convent, under one condition. She cannot leave the convent without my written permission."

It was the least I could do for an innocent woman. It would quickly deflate the anger of the crowd demanding her release. They thanked me and I led them to the provost marshal's office to arrange the transfer of Mrs. Carmaux. Along the way, I asked the monsignor if he knew Mrs. Carmaux well.

"She and her husband are lifelong parishioners." He had a deep, gravelly voice that commanded attention.

"Do you have any idea why she carried a pistol in her purse?"

"These days, who wouldn't? Most women do. Most men, too. Mrs. Carmaux's husband works long hours and she was walking alone, was she not?"

"Do you know where she was coming from at the time she was arrested?"

He shook his head.

As I wrote out the order of release, I asked the monsignor and the sister to speak with Mrs. Carmaux. Find out where she was coming from and where she was going and, more importantly, if she saw anyone else in the alleys.

"She will not speak with me," I said.

"Understandable, under the circumstances," Toulon said.

"You may not believe this, but I'm not Mrs. Carmaux's enemy."

His deep-set eyes told me otherwise. I handed the release order to an orderly with instructions to take these people directly to the hospital prison ward.

Now, I thought, as they walked away, all I have to do is find the real killer.

The First Presbyterian Church loomed over Lafayette Square in the American section, in what was called the Faubourg St. Mary, directly across Canal Street from the old French Quarter of town. Like a gothic cathedral—much taller than the Catholic St. Louis Cathedral—it featured a single towering spire above a dozen smaller pointy spires and arched stained-glass windows. It was an impressive edifice.

It smelled of burning candles inside, its interior brightly lit from the midday sunlight streaming through the many windows. An elderly woman sat in a pew up front. She was reading a Bible.

I was about to ask her how I might find the pastor when a woman wearing a bright green dress came out of the back of the church. She was tall, with light brown hair, and did something no woman before had done when first meeting me here in New

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Orleans. She smiled as she approached.

I quickly removed my hat and ran my fingers through my hair.

She stopped two feet away and tilted her head to the side as I introduced myself.

"I'm Olivia Hunter," she said. "My father is pastor here."

I immediately took out my notes and pencil and said, "You were one of the ladies detained by Lieutenant Langford last night?"

Her back stiffened immediately.

"Please accept my apologies. You and your mother and friend should never have been detained."

"Arrested, you mean." She wasn't a pretty woman, nose a little too long, chin a little too pointy, forehead a little too big, but the way she carried herself was attractive. A twinkle came to her brown eyes as she stared into mine for a long moment, more brazenly than women usually stare into a strange man's eyes, especially in a church.

"I stand corrected."

She shifted her weight to her left leg. "Does this mean the charges are dismissed?"

"There will be no charges. Again, please accept our apologies."

"Is this because your abusive lieutenant is dead?"

So word had spread through the American section of town as it had the Creole section. Then I remembered. The newspapers. I watched her eyes as I asked, "What did you ladies do after you were released?"

"We rushed off. What should we have done?"

I asked what route they took and learned they'd hurried up St. Peter Street.

"Did you see Lieutenant Langford again?"

She blinked and took in a deep breath. "Thankfully, no."

The sound of a door opening and closing drew my attention to the back of the church where a man in a black suit approached. I had time for one last question.

"Do you know who killed Lieutenant Langford?"

"Anne Carmaux did it."

"You saw her do it?"

"Heavens, no. I don't know her. But you arrested her, didn't you?"

The man in black stepped up, his voice rising. "What is the meaning of this?"

Before I could speak, Olivia Hunter introduced Pastor Ambrose Hunter, her father, and told him I was there to tell her the charges related to violating General Butler's revolting order were dismissed.

"I would like to speak with Myrtle Hunter," I said.

Pastor Hunter, a man in his mid fifties with black hair streaked

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with gray, had harsh hazel eyes and a mean set to his mouth. He ordered me out of the church immediately.

"You will not speak with my wife or my daughter again!" He took a defiant step toward me.

"Pastor, I'll remind you New Orleans is under martial law. I'll leave when I feel like leaving."

He raised his fists. "This House of the Lord is not under martial law."

Wrong, you old Confederate.

I turned to Olivia and asked if she or her companions carried weapons last night.

"Enough!" the pastor boomed, stepping in front of his daughter. He ordered her to leave and glared at me, a hard glint to his mean eyes. Olivia inched slowly away.

I asked the pastor what he had done last night.

"Get out!" The fists rose again, but I didn't flinch.

"He was here," Olivia answered for him. "At the Protestant minister's conclave."

Pastor Hunter turned to his daughter and again ordered her to leave immediately.

As she backed away, Olivia smiled at me and indicated with a nod of her head that she still wanted to speak to me.

It was time for a strategic withdrawal. I turned away and my leg gave out so that I had to grab a pew. The strength returned quickly, but I couldn't stop my limp as I moved away.

"Captain," Olivia called out. "Were you wounded in battle?"

I turned back and nodded. The pastor had his fists on his hips now.

"Where?" Olivia again.

"Bull Run."

There wasn't a hint of sympathy in their eyes, not that I expected any.

I lunched at Cafe Michelle, a tiny place along the first floor of the Pontalba House on Jackson Square. The old red-brick Pontalba was celebrated for its ornate wrought-iron balconies and the fact that it was the oldest apartment house in North America.

After a thick bowl of gumbo, brimming with shrimp and oysters and laced with okra and the French sassafras they call filé, and two cups of strong café au lait, I felt revitalized enough to speak to the third woman detained by Lieutenant Langford. As I walked down Royal Street, my leg throbbing and every muscle aching from lack of sleep, I thought of the questions I'd ask the lady.

Stopping at St. Peter Street, I checked my notes. The third woman owned a dress shop at the corner of Royal Street and St. Ann Street, a block away. I could see the plaque hanging in front

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of the small shop, along the first floor of a two-story Creole townhouse with iron posts supporting a wrought-iron balcony along the second floor. This Spanish architecture dominated the French Quarter, I'd learned, because the Spanish had rebuilt nearly the entire city after two devastating fires.

The shop was called Madame Samuels and I found a very handsome woman sitting alone inside with a half-dozen vases of fresh roses. The scent of roses was so strong it made me sneeze before I could introduce myself.

Hat in hand, I said, "Captain Jason Bartlett, ma'am. Are you Melissa Samuels?"

She sucked in a deep breath and nodded slowly.

"I am investigating the death of Lieutenant David Langford."

Melissa Samuels stood immediately. A small woman, with reddish brown hair, dark brown eyes, and lips that looked as if they'd been carved by a sculptor, she was barely a couple of inches over five feet tall. She wore a lightweight white cotton dress with a finely embroidered collar.

"What do you want with me?" Her left hand rose to her throat.

"You were nearby when the lieutenant was killed." I waved around at the shop. "And your business is close-by. Did you come here after you left the Calaboose last night?"

She backed away as if from contagion. I noticed small lines around her mouth. She had to be in her mid thirties, still lovely, however—very lovely, in fact.

"Why are you and not the local constable investigating this case?" Her voice had a defiant catch to it.

I reminded her there were no constables anymore, none with any authority anyway. With some Rebels, it still hadn't registered. "*Martial law,*" *I said, then added a question.* "*Did you see Lieutenant Langford after you left the Calaboose?*"

Both hands rose to her throat and her lips quivered as she said, "I didn't kill him." She turned and disappeared through a door into the back of the building. I heard the metallic click of a lock.

"Did you see who did kill him?" I looked around at the empty shop, put my hat back on, and went out. Standing beneath the balcony, I continued my questions in a low voice. "You weren't carrying a gun, were you, Melissa Samuels? What about the other two women? Did you see Anne Carmaux? Did the sergeant-major or his men follow Lieutenant Langford out and shoot him? Or was it someone else entirely?"

Shaking my head, I walked down Royal to Dumaine and then down to Chartres Street toward St. Mary's Church, which Monsignor Toulon had explained was alongside the Ursuline Convent. The people I passed stayed on the other side of the narrow streets. As I approached, they crossed away from me. No women spat at

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me. None would even look my way. Two men did, their mouths set in grim, determined slits, as if ready for a challenge.

Monsignor Toulon saw me at the same moment I spotted him, coming out of his church. He waved to me and waited, looking up at the afternoon sun as I approached along the wall surrounding the convent.

I thought I'd disarm him with my first question.

"Father, do you know if there was a Protestant ministers' conclave at the First Presbyterian Church last night?"

His brow furrowed. "There was."

"Pastor Ambrose Hunter would have been in attendance?"

"The archbishop and I were invited by Pastor Hunter and we all were in attendance."

So the old Confederate pastor wasn't anywhere near the alley where Langford met his demise.

"How is Mrs. Carmaux?" I asked.

"Better now she's not in a jail." The priest folded his arms across his massive chest.

"Have you spoken with her?"

He nodded. "She said she didn't kill your lieutenant. She was coming from confession at the cathedral. I spoke with Father LeBlanc, and he was hearing confessions at the time and is fairly certain Mrs. Carmaux was one of the women."

I took out my notebook and jotted down Father LeBlanc's name. Toulon watched and read my mind when he said, "You won't get any of the other women who went to confession to speak with you." He unfolded his arms and smiled weakly. "I took the liberty of meeting with two of them and they confirmed Mrs. Carmaux's story. One even said she heard the gunshot *before* Mrs. Carmaux left the cathedral."

I did my best to keep my face from revealing anything. I tucked the notebook back in my jacket pocket and let out a long breath. It was my time to look up at the strong sun, closing my eyes.

"I can't release her yet. Not outright," I told Monsignor Toulon. "I have . . . superiors. But if you could be so kind as to deliver a message to Mrs. Carmaux, I'd appreciate it."

He waited until I looked at him before asking, "What is your message?"

"I believe her."

His eyebrows rose.

"Please extend my apologies to Mr. and Mrs. Carmaux and thank the good sisters for their generosity."

I left him with a slack-jawed expression. My stomach was jittery, probably from the rich gumbo, and my legs wobbly. I needed sleep. Badly.

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A good night's sleep refreshed me enough to get an early start. As I dressed, I decided that if I wasn't getting information from the women arrested by Lieutenant Langford, maybe I could from a check of Langford's background.

Over a hearty Yankee breakfast of fresh eggs, bacon, ham, biscuits, and hot chocolate, I spoke with several junior officers on General Butler's staff and learned Lieutenant Langford was quite a ladies' man. He was known to frequent the seedier parts of town, in particular the red-light Basin Street area. I figured that in the A.M., the whores, muggers, and pickpockets would be asleep and easier to find than when loose on the street in the P.M.

At seven, I crossed Canal Street back into the Creole section. I'd slept so soundly I'd missed the heavy rainstorm that turned the streets of old New Orleans into canals. Moving through ankle-deep water, I stepped up on the "neutral ground," called medians up North, at the center of the wide street.

I walked along the neutral ground up to Basin Street, the hot sun beating down on my head. Sunlight glimmered on the brown water, and I could see vapor rising. It was like walking through steam.

Hotel bars, gambling houses, and brothels lined Basin Street for nearly a mile from Canal Street. The first, a three-story Greek Revival mansion with white columns supporting lace balconies, was called Ruth's. I found Ruth, who looked a lot like General Butler, sitting up in a huge bed on the second floor. In pink nightclothes, she was having her morning coffee and pralines.

I declined the pecan candy and the coffee and inquired about Lieutenant Langford. She'd never heard the name, so I described him. Many Yankee officers frequented her establishment, she said, but she didn't recognize Langford from my description. To my surprise, she allowed me to question her ladies, and for the next hour, I interrupted the beauty rest of thirteen ladies of the night who, to a person, talked freely with me, but had no useful information.

Another surprise: None propositioned me. Maybe it was the serious look on my face. More likely, it was that I'd explained to them that provost marshal meant military police.

After visiting nine brothels, three gambling houses, and six barrooms, I finally found someone who admitted to knowing Lieutenant David Langford. Gail Jones, sitting on a stool at the rear of Foster's Saloon, blinked her bloodshot blue eyes at me and said, "I haven't stopped drinking since I heard about Davey."

Sitting on the stool next to her, I asked the bartender for two coffees. Strong coffees.

Gail was a strawberry blonde with a pixie face and a slim figure. There was a harshness about her that kept her from being beautiful. She'd met Davey Langford three months ago when he strolled

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into Foster's in his crisp uniform. He took Gail up on her proposition and was soon visiting her regularly at her crib above the bar, third floor, rear room. He gave her money and took her to supper occasionally, but never to any of the finer restaurants.

"Not that I expected that." Gail's accent was hard to place so I asked and she told me she was from Rhode Island, originally. "Then, when he found a sweetheart, he quit taking me to supper."

Her coffee untouched, I ordered her another beer and asked about this sweetheart.

She shook her head. "Never told me her name but I knew she was a lady 'cause he kept visiting me for his pleasures."

I looked away from those sad eyes and asked, "Where did she live?"

"I don't know anything else about her, 'cept she was smaller than me." Gail took a deep drink of her beer.

I waited before asking, "Smaller?"

"Called her his 'Little Sweetheart.' "

Loud voices behind us turned me around as two men went at it, fistfighting, turning over two tables until two large bouncers grabbed them and shoved them outside. Gail didn't seem to notice the ruckus.

"Is there anything else you can remember about her?"

Gail stared into her glass and let out a long sigh.

I continued in a quieter voice. "He'd visit you for his pleasures. What, after visiting her?"

"Yes." She twisted the glass of beer between her hands. "Said she was concerned about nosy neighbors, so she made him leave early." She choked back a sob. "And he'd come to me."

She lifted her beer and drank as tears rolled down her sunken cheeks.

Stepping out of Foster's, I spotted Sergeant-Major Jeffries crossing Basin Street, heading directly for me. The two men who'd been fighting inside, and several others, watched us as we met. Jeffries saluted smartly and said he had a message for me.

He stepped closer, his voice low. "Miss Olivia Hunter is waiting in the cathedral for you, sir."

I thanked him and as we started across Basin, I had to ask, "How'd you find me?"

He twirled the edge of his handlebar moustache. "You stand out in a crowd, sir."

I hadn't tried to hide my activities, but was still surprised that what I was doing was such common knowledge.

"Sar'nt, when Lieutenant Langford left the Calaboose, were all your men inside?"

"Yes, sir."

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"None of you followed him out."

The sergeant-major stopped, causing me to turn back to him. If he was an actor, he was good because his face was masked in surprise. "Are you meaning, sir, that Mrs. Carmaux didn't do it?"

I hoped my face revealed nothing as I turned and continued on.

Jeffries caught up quickly, shaking his head as he walked. "This is quite a mystery, sir."

"You can be of service." I let that sink in a second. "As Provost Marshal Sergeant-Major, with your duty at the Calaboose, you are in the perfect position to canvass the alleys. I realize few Rebs will talk with us, but you might find the one who will. Someone just might have seen something that night."

Arriving at Royal Street, I looked over at Madame Samuels's salon. The door was open, to allow fresh air inside, no doubt. Before Jeffries peeled away, I gave him a direct order.

"You are not to repeat what I said about Mrs. Carmaux. As far as anyone knows, she's the killer. Understand?"

"Yes, sir." I'm sure he didn't understand my intentions, but he understood a direct order. Hell, I wasn't even sure of my intentions, except to play this hand close to the vest. Very close.

St. Louis Cathedral towered over Jackson Square with three pointed spires. The masonry walls of the old basilica were painted a light tan. The center steeple was covered in slate, its Swiss-made clock indicating five o'clock.

Crossing the foyer, I removed my hat and stepped into the well-lit interior. The majesty of the place struck me immediately—the polished marble floor, the roof decorated with frescoes, the pillars lining either side of the center aisle, pillars supporting interior balconies running the length of the place. Unlike Protestant churches, the cathedral was decorated with beautifully made statues, Joan of Arc and St. Louis, King of France, at the rear, Jesus on the cross up front.

Several black-clad women knelt in pews along the right side of the church. Another knelt closer to the altar. I heard a movement to my left and a small black woman approached. She wore a red bandanna on her head and came straight toward me.

"Mizz Olivia is up front, suh," she said softly. She was young, around twenty, with velvety skin, full lips, and large brown eyes.

"What's your name?" I whispered.

She took a step back and said, "Angel."

I smiled and thanked her, looking in the direction she pointed to the black-clad woman up front. I went down the side aisle. Olivia had her head bowed as she prayed, her head covered with a black shawl. I waited at the end of the pew until she made the sign of the cross and waved me over. She sat back in the pew.

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"I didn't realize you were Catholic," I said as I sat next to her.

"My husband was and I converted when we married, may he rest in peace." She made the sign of the cross again. "His ship sank in a storm in the gulf three years ago."

She stared into my eyes, almost intrusively, for long moments, and slowly, a smile crept across her lips.

"Who were you praying to?" I waved to the statues in front of us.

She nodded to the statue of Mary.

"Our Lady of Prompt Succor. The patron saint of New Orleans."

"Really?" The statue was quite lovely.

"We prayed to her to deliver us from the British. In eighteen-fifteen. The Battle of New Orleans."

I knew people prayed for deliverance from fires or hurricanes, but had never thought of a patron saint as one who brought victory in battle. Then I looked back at Joan of Arc and nodded.

"I can't stay long," she said, folding her hands in her lap. "And I can't tell you what happened that night." She looked at Mary's statue and took in a deep breath. "To my father's chagrin, I haven't returned to his church. But I made a vow, a promise to him and my mother that I wouldn't reveal what happened."

I leaned closer. "Anne Carmaux didn't kill Langford."

She looked at her hands and said, "What did she say?"

"She said she didn't do it."

"Exactly what did she say?"

I pulled out my notes and read, "She told Monsignor Toulon she didn't kill our lieutenant."

Olivia looked up. "Anne said, 'I didn't do it,' and I said, 'Anne Carmaux did it,' and what did Melissa Samuels say to you?"

I flipped through my notes. "She said, 'I didn't kill him.'"

A noise alerted me to a nervous Angel standing at the end of the pew. She bounced on her toes. Olivia nodded and waved her away. Angel went back down the aisle.

"My mother and I received permission to leave. We're going to stay with relatives in Charleston." She looked around the cathedral. "I'm going to miss New Orleans."

I told her learning about New Orleans had been the only delight in my current assignment.

"Only delight?"

Olivia's brown eyes stared back into mine for another long moment before she said, "I won't break my vow, but I will tell you this. Only one of those statements is true." She stood suddenly and I followed suit, backing my way to the aisle.

She smiled warmly. "Use your brain, Mr. Yankee, and you'll have the solution to your mystery." With that she eased past me and moved toward Angel.

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I sat back down and looked at the large mural behind the altar. Only one of the statements was true?

I heard a rustle and turned to see Olivia beside me again. She nodded toward the mural and said, "St. Louis announcing the Seventh Crusade." Then she leaned forward and brushed her lips across mine. "Always wondered what it would be like to kiss a Yankee."

She left before I could think of an intelligent response. She did seem pleased, however. I felt my heart pounding in my chest as I tried to recover my thoughts and quickly rewrote the three answers I'd received.

I jotted:

Anne Carmaux: I didn't kill your lieutenant.

Olivia Hunter: Anne did it.

Melissa Samuels: I didn't do it.

If only one statement was true, then—

Footsteps again in the aisle and a small, balding priest stepped up and said, "Are you here for confession, my son?"

"Father LeBlanc?"

"Yes." His eyes lit up.

"I'm actually here to see you, Father. Do you have a moment?"

To put the last piece proving Anne Carmaux's innocence firmly in place, I asked Father LeBlanc if she had indeed gone to confession the night before last. He took me to the confessional and led me inside where I was unable to see his face through the confessional screen. He didn't have to explain further. As I left, I noticed a line of women awaiting confession.

Sergeant-Major Jeffries was waiting for me at the iron gate leading into Jackson Square. He stood with a tall black man in a brown shirt and dungarees.

"Cap'n, this is Josiah Waters, a free man of color. He works for the archdiocese and has something to tell you."

Waters was elderly, and stood with a stoop so that despite his once-considerable height he had to look up at my eyes as he told me how he worked the garden behind the cathedral. "I work at night very often," he said in a baritone voice. Obviously well-educated.

"I've seen a Union officer visit Madame Samuels many a night, sir. I even saw them kiss goodnight once." He nodded and folded his arms.

"Cap'n," Jeffries waded in, "I canvassed, as you suggested, and this man came forward immediately."

I asked Josiah Waters to describe the officer and his description fit Langford. I tried several more questions, but he'd already given me the pertinent details, so I thanked him kindly, thanked the sergeant-major, and headed to my quarters to put the pieces together.

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It came to me over a good Yankee supper of braised mutton, roast beef, baked potatoes, and bean soup.

Only one statement was true.

Anne Carmaux—I didn't kill your lieutenant.

Olivia Hunter—Anne did it.

Melissa Samuels—I didn't do it.

If Anne was the killer, then Olivia's statement and Melissa's were true. Two true statements. If Olivia was the killer, then Anne's and Melissa's statements were true.

If Melissa was the killer, however, only one statement would be true, and that was Anne's.

I went over it again to be sure. The remainder of the mutton and beef went down very smoothly.

Armed with an arrest warrant and a warrant to search Madame Samuels's, both signed by the naval captain serving as the U.S. occupation's judge advocate, I arrived on Royal Street at eight A.M. with two marines, Sergeant-Major Jeffries, and an army nurse.

Melissa Samuels, clad in a thick robe, let us in, but only after protracted knocking that roused a number of her neighbors. I sent Jeffries to speak with them, in case he could discover another Josiah Waters, and led the way into the dress shop.

The gun was still in her purse, still with one empty casing. It was a Colt Pocket Model .31-caliber six-shot revolver with a short, stubby barrel.

I sent the nurse in to supervise Melissa Samuels's dressing and asked the marines to wait out front. When Melissa stepped back in from the rear, there was seething hatred in her eyes.

Sitting across from her as we rode the carriage to the hospital prison ward, I asked, "Do you want to tell me how it happened?"

She wouldn't even look at me.

"Did he provoke you again, after you left the Calaboose?" *Or did you lay in wait for him?*

She closed her eyes.

"He wasn't a good man, although his wife is quite upset."

The eyes snapped open. "Wife?"

I nodded and could see my little white lie hit something. I waited, holding my breath, but she seemed to recover, so I tried a different tack. "We don't really need a confession. We have enough facts. It's just that—" I paused for effect. "His wife keeps asking why."

Melissa leaned forward and hissed, "He deserved killing." Then she sat back, prim, like a refined lady, and closed her eyes again.

As I exited the Ursuline Convent, after apologizing to Anne Carmaux and her husband, after giving them her formal release papers, signed by me and the Judge Advocate, after thanking the

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mother superior for her kindness and Monsignor Toulon for his help, I found Major Dover waiting for me.

Anne Carmaux had refused to talk to me. She finally looked at me as I passed the papers to her husband, and her bright green eyes gave me such a look of contempt.

Dover returned my salute and said, "Well, Captain, I see you've been busy."

"Yes, sir."

"Let's walk and talk." Dover led us away from the convent's entrance. After a few steps he added, "The general is not a happy man."

"The general said I could release her if I was certain of her innocence."

He shook his head. "As long as Mrs. Carmaux was the killer, we had a lone woman in an alley with a gun. Now," he paused at the corner and let a carriage roll past. "Now, we have a woman Lieutenant Langford arrested for violating our beloved general's order."

He looked at me. "You, sir, have refocused attention on," he crinkled his nose, "General Order Number Twenty-Eight." Putting his hands behind his back, he led us across Ursulines Street. We walked nearly the entire block before he added, "It's unfortunate. Unfortunate."

I found my voice. "The truth is often . . . unfortunate."

Dover stopped, narrowed his eyes at me, and asked, "How's your leg?"

"Fine."

"Good, then I'm sure you'll be seeing action soon." And he left me.

Three blocks later, I came across a boy hawking *The Daily Crescent,* calling out, "Read about it. Read about the Second Battle of Manassas! Yankees routed again!"

It was all there, in black and white. Bull Run all over again, only worse, with many more casualties. A complete defeat. General Pope shoved out of Virginia by the deadly combination of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson.

I rubbed my knee and felt the acid in my stomach.

This was going to be a long war. ●

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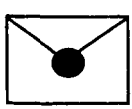

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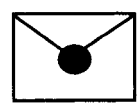

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Joy

by Daniel Gould Levine

Over six thousand children in the United States go missing each year. Many times the abductors are divorced parents who don't return the child on time. Some of them take to the road or shack up in some motel. But most of those children are found and delivered home safely in a matter of weeks. They'll have a chance conversation with a stranger at a hotel pool who becomes suspicious and gives us a call. A policeman sees a smiling man yanking a little girl along by the hand. The state department of transportation will broadcast descriptions of the abductor's vehicle on road signs and a trucker will notice the dusty car in a flapjack-joint lot. The National Center for Missing Children has a 93.3 percent total recovery rate, an astonishing increase of 11.6 percent from last year, and most of the children are returned unharmed.

Brooklynite Daniel Gould Levine works as a freelance writer and editor when he is not writing fiction. His short stories have appeared in on-line publications such as *Story-glossia* and in literary magazines such as *Rhapsoidia,* but this is his first paid fiction credit. The story centers round the difficult subject of abducted children. Its nuanced portrayal of its characters' sensibilities is memorable. †

The statistics are listed in the little pamphlets and brochures that we give parents when they first visit our office, and all the NCMC counselors know them by heart.

The Fadyns are in my office when I arrive this morning, my assistant Caroline tells me. "Thank you, Caroline," I say.

Caroline waits for me to speak, and upon my silence says, "Third time this week."

"All right, Caroline, thanks," I say. I walk past her and enter my office, which has a view of the parking lot with a dark forest beyond it.

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Eve Fadyn disappeared in the spring, five years ago. Her mother last saw her in the backyard when the little girl waved to Mom in the kitchen window before skipping down a dirt path that led to Fullman's Gulch. Daisies and blackberries grow in the meadow by Fullman's Gulch, and Eve walked the half-mile by herself that afternoon to pick flowers and berries for the dinner table. She was wearing a red flower-print dress with strings at the back of her neck and white socks with frills around the anklets. The chances that Eve is still wearing that dress and those socks today are slim, but we take down all the information we can.

They both stand when I enter. "Sit down, please," I tell them. "How are you? So nice to see you again."

"We're so sorry to bother you again," Mrs. Fadyn says, "but we couldn't tell you this over the phone."

Caroline is right, three visits in one week. It's been five years, and now three visits in the same week. Their desperation must be growing thick. A trained veteran can see the strain around the edges, like peeling paint on a cellar door. After so long, some parents will lose hope, and I rarely see them at all. Others feel the panic of caged horses, teeth bared and wall-eyed.

One mother lost her son on a ski slope, just as the lifts were closing. She went into the lodge to make a phone call, and minutes later he was gone. He stayed gone for three years and then one day she came to my office with an old shoe. It was small, for a toddler's foot, and she showed me the sole where her son had once stepped in tar and then tracked it all over the living room rug. "See," she said, tracing the tar spot with her fingernail. "See, right there. I know this is just an old shoe, but . . . but will it help at all?"

Sometimes I feel like a sponge.

Mrs. Fadyn has something to tell me. Whatever it is, she'll do the telling. Several years ago, I was showing them our "Picture Them Home" poster for Eve, the little girl all honey and milk with pigtails and a white lace collar. Mrs. Fadyn stood up and turned around, her throat working hard as if swallowing pins. "Come on, Stan," she said, "let's go." Mr. Fadyn stared at the poster, his body rising to fill his coat, eyes never leaving my desk. "Let's *go,* Stan," she said, already out the door, and before he left his hand grasped the doorknob, gently, as if somehow trying to hold on. He opened his mouth, leaning toward me and gripping that doorknob, wanting desperately to talk, and his wife said in a low voice, *"Come on, Stan, now,"* and then he was gone.

I place my cup of tea on the desk and glance up. There is something strange about Mrs. Fadyn's face, but for a moment I cannot tell what it is. Then I see that her eyes, usually deep Prussian blue, are red-rimmed and watery. And now a bright tear falls from her lashes and snakes down a pale cheek.

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From the first day I met her, she never cried. They came to my office that first day from the police station and Mr. Fadyn was wilted like an old barn and weeping to himself. Mrs. Fadyn looked tired and her eyes were dull with sea clouds, but they were still bone dry. Her husband was lost within himself, his head so heavy, but she looked around my office while we spoke and noticed the painting on the wall.

Her eyes cleared for a moment. "That's nice," she said in a soft voice. "Did you paint that?"

"Yes," I said. "I did."

"It's so lovely," she said. "Where did you learn to paint?"

"Bob Ross," I told her.

"I'm sorry . . . Bob Ross? I don't know him."

I swallowed. "Bob Ross," I said. "Bob Ross, on television. *The Joy of Painting.* You've never heard of Bob Ross?"

"Oh," she said. "The man with the big hair and the happy clouds and trees . . . right?"

"Yes," I said. "He's the one." I leaned back in my chair, smiling and wiping my forehead.

She continued to stare at the painting with a little dreamy smile on her face. "The television show taught you how to paint?" she said in a small, distant voice.

"I watch him absolutely every day," I said. "Every day."

"It's so . . ." she said. Her face was clear, and floating somewhere in the painted sky. "It's so . . . it makes me so happy, for some reason. Like I've been there before."

"Maybe you have," I told her. "All of Bob's paintings are familiar," I tap my chest, "in here."

Mr. Fadyn managed to lift his head, and I could hear the old boards creaking in protest. He looked at the painting, and a dark bird flew across his features before his head dropped again.

"I think it's nice that you have something," Mrs. Fadyn said. "Painting, I mean."

"And my job," I said.

And now she is crying, silently like her husband on that first day, but not pitiful and ashamed weeping on my floor. "We had to see you in person," she says. "Something has happened."

I watch Mr. Fadyn, but his face is blank canvas.

"We got a letter," she says, her body coming alive like a flock of sparrows. My eyes drop to her blue-roped hand, holding an envelope corner from her purse. "We got a letter from Eve," she says.

It is several moments before I can rip my gaze up to her face. "What?" I ask.

The tears start bubbling now. Her face is gleaming wet and she's smiling and hiccupping and smiling through her ropy hand. "Oh God," she says, "she's alive. We got a letter from Eve."

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Later I'm walking to my car when Mrs. Fadyn calls to me. She's made her husband stop and he's waiting behind blurred glass in their station wagon. I stand with my key out and watch her run toward me, and with every step I expect her frail ankles to snap and carry her down like a card house. She runs, calling my name, and I stand watching her arrive.

"What is it, Mrs. Fadyn?" I say, while she trembles against my car.

"Do you . . ." she says. "Do you think everything will be all right now? Do you really believe we'll find her?"

"The police are examining the letter, Mrs. Fadyn. They'll let us know."

"Wait," she says. "But what do you think? This letter . . . it proves she's alive, doesn't it? You've helped us for so long . . . I have to know what you think. I trust your opinion." She searches my face, and I almost feel as though I'm inside the painting in my office, with her face outside the frame looking in.

"I don't like to say for sure, Mrs. Fadyn," I tell her. "I don't want to give you . . . false hope."

"But you must hope," she says, almost as a command. "In your job, you simply must have hope. Please, you can tell me."

"We do hope, Mrs. Fadyn, of course we do. But it's my job to be realistic, too. For me," I pause, glancing above the car roofs at a white sky. *For me, every time I see a child laughing, I also see them mangled in a weedy ditch.*

I almost say this, just to see what she'd do. She might have spit at me, as at a monster. Or she might even have cried again, almost.

Or "You . . . you poor man," she might say, her hand aching to touch my face, to cradle me like a child. "You poor, brave man. How you must suffer."

"We all suffer," I'd reply. "I suffer so that some children can live."

Instead I just shrug, look down at my shoes. "I'm sorry. Let's see what the police have to say. I have to go home now, Mrs. Fadyn. I have to eat my dinner and watch my show."

"Your show?"

"Bob Ross. I tape him every afternoon."

"Oh yes," she says. "Now I watch him too sometimes. He's a very lovely man. So gentle."

"Very gentle," I say. "Now go back to your husband, and hope together."

"Yes," she says. She turns, then stops. "How . . ." she says. I wait. "How can you do . . . what you do? How can you?"

I speak to her back. "I have to. I can't help it."

On the drive home I feel a little dizzy and want to pull over. There's a Dairy Queen with some old benches by the roadside, and I coast into the lot. I buy an ice cream and sit at a bench facing a sharp gully that falls into a dry brook with woods rising above it.

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"I can't help it," my dad once said in a letter, the last he ever wrote to me. I hadn't thought about that letter in a while, until the words came from my mouth. I kept the letter behind a loose panel in my bureau, as Dad asked me to do. It was quite different from the one he'd left Mom, and it wouldn't do to have her comparing the two. It was a kindness to her that he asked me to hide it, for he knew Mom would rather go on pretending that everything he said in his letter to her was the truth. "Be good to your mother," he also wrote to me. "For her, it's much better to be good than honest."

The last I ever saw of Dad was out the window from my bed, as he carried a suitcase to his car. He was very still and quiet, and cast almost no shadow in the dull moonlight, and left no footprints on the wet black grass. For a moment it seemed that he might never reach the carport, but stay frozen forever in my window frame between the house and the misty blue woods. It was one of those nights when big white clouds race across the sky.

I read part of Mom's letter one night, when she fell asleep with it on the couch. It was clutched so tightly in her hand, I was afraid to tear it. At the bottom, my father wrote, "See you soon," and then, "Love."

Wheels crunch on loose gravel behind me, and several doors open and slam shut. Little voices come very close to my bench and a boy is singing with his sisters. It's a song I used to know as a child, but haven't heard in a while. "I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart," and the little sisters yell, "Where?" "Down in my heart, down in my heart." I start singing along in a deep voice, and the little boy grins and points at me. "Hey!" he cries. "Hey, mister!" The parents smile at me and duck under the awning of the ice cream counter. I lick my spoon and crunch the frozen candy, and watch a jay fly into the far woods and disappear.

Allison Marlon was found in a gully like this just two weeks ago, a scene Bob would have made beautiful. He would have started with phthalo-blue brush strokes in the sky, and cumulus clouds with alizarin tinge. A dark ridge of fir trees falls off the fan brush, blurred at the bottom for mist, and out of the mist rolls hinterlands of Indian yellow and burnt-sienna weeds, dropping down into a long flat field by a gully with a dried-up bed. The knife cuts into the canvas to make a rim of ice frost around the frozen mud, and Bob would gracefully and gently cover up Allison's white naked body, pitted with lavender holes, with a cluster of birch trees and brush.

Bob Ross is an honest man who paints what he sees, but he would still shield us from Allison's corpse, like a gracious undertaker. Bob says you can do whatever you want, the canvas is your world, and that is the joy of painting. He would not call it dishonest to hide the ugliness, because you should paint whatever makes you happy. For some reason I think of Mrs. Fadyn and the letter.

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Sometimes I try to imagine the parents of missing children at home, still going on with things. Not with the masks they wear in my office, but just alone together after work. I think of a fireside scene, like an oil painting with the mother knitting or reading and the father smoking a pipe and a warm pup lying on their feet. I'll crouch outside the window and watch them through the frosty glass, happy together but alone. Or I'll watch them with no fire, cold and hating each other in the dark. Or I'll watch them throw plates and scream, hating each other with such intensity that they forget about themselves and about Jacob Allen.

They can forget Jacob Allen was taken from the park and laid at nightfall on the wet sandbar of a river in Colorado. There was an ongoing national conference in Boulder when Jacob disappeared, and the speaker held a moment of silence for the little boy. "Due to our constantly improving resources," the speaker said, "we can find and save thousands of children like Jacob each year." A smooth-skinned face with freckles and beaver teeth grinned at us in the auditorium from a projection screen. "Thousands of children like Jacob," he repeated. Children like Jacob, but not Jacob. No one could save Jacob from staining the sand crimson in the moonlight in a naked heap.

My dad once cut his hand while sawing branches in the yard. I watched him from the window, with tall pine trees behind him and sunbeams breaking through, and the bright crimson running across his arm. Mom ran quickly to him and said something. Dad shook his head, staring at his hand, and shook his head again. Mom faltered, then walked back toward the house until she disappeared from the window frame.

My ice cream is melting, and has dripped on my hands. I wipe them clean with a napkin, and walk back to my car. My hands are sticky, but I don't want to use the washroom. I have to get home.

My cabin sits on a crest, surrounded by a ring of birch trees and low purple mountains. The roof is missing some shingles, but I have a good fireplace with a narrow stone chimney on top.

There's a painting of my cabin on the front entrance wall, with a finger of smoke trailing from the chimney. The paintings continue around the corner where they line the living room. Several paintings are stacked on the floor and others lean in rows by the corner. I put a turkey dinner in the microwave, and then carry it out to my easel and chair by the television.

My mother took away my paints and Bob Ross privileges when I was a teenager. She used to watch the program with me, and approved once she heard Bob talking about God. Then one day she entered my room while I was playing in the yard and looked in my closet where my paintings were kept.

I found her standing in the closet doorway with her hand still

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raised to the light cord. I must have startled her, because she gave a little cry when she saw me behind her. She must have been there awhile. There was a glass of milk for me in her hand, and when I took it from her it was quite warm.

"Honey," she said. "Are . . . " She paused, glancing back into the closet. "Are you sure that you're . . . doing this right?"

I sipped the warm milk.

"What I mean is," she said. "Well, Bob's paintings . . . somehow, they . . . look different. I don't know."

"I'm just learning, Mom," I said.

"What . . ." She was peering in the closet again. "What . . . "

I came around to stand by her side.

"Maybe you shouldn't watch the show anymore," she said. "For a while, at least. Maybe you should take a break from painting."

"Okay, Mom," I said.

She watched my face for a while, then moved into the closet. "Well, I'm going to . . . " In the act of bending toward a painting, she paused and shuddered. Her hand withdrew to her waist. "I want you to take these paintings and put them in the basement," she said.

"Okay, Mom," I said. Her eyes were strange as she watched me. She wanted me to cry or beg, not because she wanted me hurt, but because she expected that much. People say they want to know your real thoughts, the truth, but they really don't. They only want the simplest and neatest you possible. The layer on top is good enough for them.

That night my mother came to my bed, crying, as she did sometimes. She talked about a lot of things, Dad mostly, but other things, too, that I didn't hear. She didn't need me to hear. My presence only gave her the excuse to talk and to cry.

Today Bob is painting a meadow with blue hills shrouded in mist. With a liner brush he snakes thin grey branches through the filmy leaves, without much detail because they're far, far away. There's a footpath through the meadow leading to a dark stand of alder trees. His brush finds bristly shadows by the tree roots where the sun can't get through and where the branches are sickly and twisted from the lack of it. He layers the shadows with sap-green–yellow highlights. "But don't kill all your dark," he says. "You need those shadows, make those shadows work for you."

Several detectives and I once trampled through a field like this one, our boots heavy with morning dew. The sun wasn't out and everything was misty and there was the thick silence of nature muffled by paint. No one spoke as we brushed through the grass toward the dark cluster of trees, like an oasis in the meadow, and as we got closer there were wet crimson beads on the grass blades.

One detective stopped me outside the little cove and looked at

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my face. "Are you sure you want to see this?" he said. I offered a forgiving smile, and moved a lock of wet blond hair from my smooth forehead and wiped a trickle of water from my pink, hairless cheeks. "I'm not as young as I look," I said.

The twin boys were there, ravaged and torn, but covered with damp leaves as if Bob had tried to hide their nakedness from the rest of us. He knew we were in the tree shadows, but he didn't show our flashlight beams and painted over the muddy footprints we'd left in the grass. He didn't paint the black crow that screamed from the tree branches. He didn't add the tiny puffs of steam from our breaths as we looked into a mud-clogged ravine at the two boys. Bob might have left the crimson droplets, using an oval brush and paint thinner to make the red stick to the grass, which to a distant viewer may have looked like roses.

The joy of Bob's painting is not only in the gentle beauty, but also the immediacy. The technique uses wet paint on a wet canvas, and all must be done quickly before the paint is dry and movement becomes impossible. The delight is in the hurried slick movements and the wetness, doing the work before the wetness is gone and the joy is over. Scarcely have the mountains arisen from the earth then the snow has fallen. Trees wrench upward like serpents and remain in autumn for mere seconds before green spring descends. And the instant tiny bodies are dumped in a drainage ditch, Bob is there to cover them with overhanging moss before the sweat on their young bodies has dried.

I'll bet after a while, Bob forgets they're in there. Most people do. It's just so much easier that way. And maybe, with the passage of time, people can forget that the child was ever taken in the first place.

The next morning I stop by the police station and speak for several minutes with the investigator in charge. I stand outside, nodding and thinking for a few moments about what he told me. Then I drive to work.

Mr. Fadyn is waiting in my office. I see him through the window that faces the parking lot. His face is toward the floor, and his long fingers softly tickle the back of his bowed neck. I watch him for several moments.

"Mr. Fadyn is in your office," Caroline, my assistant, tells me. I nod and stroll past her through my door and swing my briefcase onto my desk. The old man looks up, and it's as though some warm light has tried to find his face before dying, leaving only a cruel afterglow.

"Good morning, Mr. Fadyn," I say after several moments of silence. He doesn't reply. I wait.

"I suppose you've heard," he says, like a flutter of dusty wings from the old barn door. It's my turn to be silent.

His saggy face turns into a snarl and he strikes his thigh with a

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lumpy fist. "Stupid!" he hisses. "Stupid, stupid." I let him continue, and the snarl is gone.

"I should have known," he says. "I did know, the minute she took it in from the mailbox. I knew and I didn't say anything. I didn't even say anything to myself. I wanted to believe it; why shouldn't I? Shouldn't I be allowed to hope just for a minute, *goddammit!"* His voice splinters and he raises his fist again, but just presses it to his eye socket instead.

"For years I haven't allowed myself to be stupid. To hope so blindly like her." His shoulders tremble, and several tears race down his cheeks. "But I mean, I saw that letter, and I thought, just for a second I thought, maybe all this time I've been a fool. Maybe I've been a fool to close myself off to the possibility . . . even the possibility . . ."

I lean back in my chair and wait for him to go on. "I let my guard down," he says. "I dropped my guard for a second and allowed myself to be infected by it all. And now I'm sick. It's poisoned me, and I'm sick.

"I'm sorry," he says, shuddering. "I don't even know you. All this time, and I don't know you at all. Sorry," he says again. "I just . . . I just don't really have anywhere else to go. You know?"

"Yes," I say. "I do."

"So, do you think this is it? Is she really gone now? I mean, I know you don't *know,* but . . . is she?"

"It's hard to say, Mr. Fadyn. It's too hard to say. We've found children after over twenty years. Five years seems like a long time, but it happens."

"But will it happen to *us?"* he says, and I can almost see my reflection shaking in his glossy eyes. The intense stare continues for a long minute and then fades away, and he looks ashamed.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I apologize." He shivers. "She never really loved her," he says. "You probably don't care, but she always knew that she never loved her the way she should, the way I loved her. But that's what makes her hope, allows her to hope. She wants a second chance. She thinks she *deserves* a second chance. And now . . ." He gestures toward the empty air. "And now this."

He looks around, as if suddenly realizing where he is. The eyes turn to me. "You don't," he says. "You don't . . . *have* it, do you?"

I nod slowly. "I do," I said. "The police gave it back to me."

"Let me see it!" he snarls again, thin yellow teeth flashing. Then again, the anger subsides, and he is ashamed. "Please," he says, "let me see it. Just one more time."

A different man than I would deny him that. But I can't. I reach into my inside pocket and remove the envelope. I hand it to him, and he accepts it, gingerly, and cries as he begins to read the letter. There is silence in the office for several minutes, just the rattling of dry paper and his old breath. The letter falls on the desk.

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Dear Mommy and Daddy,

I am fine. Please dont worry about me. I am living somewere—I cant tell you were—but I am ok. I love you Mommy and Daddy and I promis that I will be coming home soon. Keep feeding Pony and let him sleep in my bed. I will be home soon. I love you Mommy, please dont be sad. I am helthy and am eating good too. Dont be sad Mommy. I love you.

Love,
Eve

Mr. Fadyn is standing against the wall, trying to hide himself. He sniffles and clears his throat. "Twenty-five years I've been living with the woman," he says. "I should have recognized the handwriting at once. There wasn't even a stamp on the goddamn envelope."

I pick up the letter with my fingertips and let it hang there, upside down.

"More paintings," he says, looking at my wall. "That one's nice," he says. He is pointing to a jagged ridge of the Rocky Mountains at moonlight, with green foothills winding down to a small river and a wet red sandbar that runs around a corner to disappear behind some brush.

He moves along the wall and passes a gully with a dried-up bed and frozen mud rimmed with ice and birch trees in the brush. Then he stops before the painting that his wife admired on her first visit to my office, five years ago. Again, that dark shadow flies across his back. His body quivers, and the shoulders stiffen through his thin jacket. Mr. Fadyn stands for a while, his back to me, staring at the scene.

It's a field with the woods on one side, and the silver flash of a brook buried in the trees. Some blackberry bushes grow near a cluster of oaks and alders, and white daisies poke through the grass. He pauses and bends closer to the painting. His body shudders as if gripped by a chill. His nose must almost be touching the paint, and I can imagine his features drawing into a squint. The smell of wet leaves invades my office. I lean back in my chair and close my eyes.

"So strange," he says, his voice raspy. "What . . . What're those? Those red things." He mutters, almost as if speaking in a dream. "Roses . . . roses? And that . . . what's that? That dark shadow . . ."

I picture his fingertips extending to touch the wall, as if for support. "What's that there?" he mutters again. "That dark clump in the weeds . . ."

"Roses," I whisper, barely audible. My eyes remain closed, and there's a dewy wind on my face. "Roses, and shadows in the alders." ●

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The Haven?

by Cornelia Snider Yarrington

With apologies to Edgar Allan Poe

Once upon a bleak November—ah, how well I still remember
hobbling, tired and weary, through the streets of Baltimore.
Until before me in the gloaming, rose the end of distant roaming,
surcease of hypothermia, corns, and blisters lay in store.

In moonlight stood a dwelling, but no mailbox nameplate telling
just whose vacant eyelike windows and bleak walls I stood before.
But I had come with clear direction to this psychopath's erection:
It was my cousin's house, I reckoned—this, and nothing more.

And on the portal smartly rapping, soon I heard a cautious tapping,
as of slippers slowly slapping on a rugless foyer floor.
Then two eyeballs dully gleaming by a candle's flickering beaming
peered with alcoholic blankness from a barely opened door.

And while he stood there, looking wary, I resolved no more to tarry
in the ghostly, frosty moonlight at his slitted foyer door.
"Let me in, good sir," I begged him, for in truth at once I pegged him
as a man too deep in spirits to resist, should I implore.

"Here before you stands a cousin, just this one and not a dozen,
begging you for shelter from the scowling, howling night;
I stand in need of lodging, so don't even think of dodging
what I ask for this one evening: Let me come into the light."

Dispensing then with further speaking to the sound of stair steps creaking,
up he led me to a dark and dismal room beneath his roof.
There he left me without heating in this chamber, thus completing
family duty in a manner both reluctant and aloof.

But by the bed, already nodding, I scarcely heard his stumbled plodding
from the dusty, musty room where doubtless none had stayed before.
I was, I thought, too weary to regret a stay so dreary
and fell asleep and heard for blissful moments nothing more.

Until from deepest dreaming, I awoke to moonlight streaming
and a sound that brought me upright in my moldy chamber bed.
There to my room devoid of heating came the sound of something beating—
beating, beating, beating. Was it only in my head?

This sound so diabolic—half systolic, half diastolic—
resounded from the walls and washed away all trace of sleep.
It was no wonder my relation needed such intense sedation,
guzzling brandy by whole bottles instead of counting sheep!

And then a strange and raspy croaking as of a smoker too long smoking,
mixed with sounds of creaking chains and grinding gears from far below,
where the basement rang with shrieking that removed all urge for peeking,
peeking down the stairwell to seek out those sounds of woe.

An instant found me dressing as I thought of reasons pressing
to be off instead of hastening through the darkness to explore.
As I left my cousin sleeping, down the stairway swiftly creeping,
there I wondered if I'd come again to Cousin Edgar's door.
And something in the shadows croaked my answer, "Nevermore."

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From left to right: Clark Howard and Doug Allyn. Taken in May, 2003, by Eve Allyn, at a restaurant near EQMM*'s offices. The first meeting of the two* EQMM *favorites.*

2003 READERS AWARD

They're amazing—giants of the mystery short story—and once again they've authored the stories you've selected as the best of the year! Doug Allyn and Clark Howard have earned an immutable place on any list of *EQMM*'s best. Since 1980 in Clark Howard's case and since 1988 in Doug Allyn's, they've been contributing stories almost guaranteed to draw enthusiastic reader response. The six Readers Awards Doug Allyn holds as of this year's voting, and the five belonging to Clark Howard, as well as the numerous second- and third-place scrolls earned by each, testify amply to their popularity.

The consistency with which you've placed their works among your top three and the near-equal status each writer's stories attain with you each year suggest you may be responding to something that is common to both writers. And there is much that they share. Both authors usually employ a "big canvas." Not for them the slice-of-life or the isolated humorous occurrence or the single emotion or obsession on which to build suspense. Their stories are long, generally novella-length, and in them one typically finds a full cast of characters, multiplicity of incident, plots and subplots. In one way or another, setting is often critical to their stories. Both Midwesterners by birth, majestic natural backdrops often feature importantly in their work, as in Doug Allyn's "Palace in the Pines," this year's Readers Award-winning story.

Both writers rely more frequently on bold, action-based plotting than on the meticulous ratiocination of traditional puzzle-spinners in the field, and pay more attention to the broad sweep of emotions than to subtle psychological dissection of character. Clark Howard's second-place winner for 2003, "The Mask of Peter," with its dramatic plotting, derring-do, and a high-stakes objective worthy of a spy thriller, exemplifies perfectly this bent in his writing, found also in many Allyn stories.

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An element that figures much less importantly in an Allyn or Howard story than in the work of many of the other masters of mystery fiction is surprise. Rather than entertaining us by leading to a clever or diabolical twist, Clark Howard and Doug Allyn seem to see the "payoff" to their readers as lying in our involvement with their characters. It is the sentiment we are left with at the end of their stories that satisfies—be it pathos, as in Allyn's "Palace in the Pines," or a sense of being uplifted, as in Howard's third-place winner for 2003, "The Leper Colony." Perhaps it is the centrality of emotion to their tales that explains, too, why romantic relationships seem to enter more readily into their stories than into those of other mystery writers, and why they so often depict those to whom life has been unfair—convicts, bikers, minorities, the terminally ill.

Whatever the particular reasons for the appeal of these authors to you, you should know that your esteem for Doug Allyn and Clark Howard is shared by their peers. The Mystery Writers of America has bestowed an Edgar and seven additional Edgar nominations on Clark Howard and an Edgar and six additional nominations on Doug Allyn. The prestigious Edgar Award, determined by a jury of distinguished mystery writers, reflects an assessment of the winners' and nominees' work by those who understand the craft that underlies it. To be celebrated so widely and repeatedly both by those focused on the artistry behind the work and by many others who simply take satisfaction in the finished product is rare. There are many different types of mystery and crime writing, many forms of excellence in our field. Indeed, in the list of runners-up that follows, you will find eleven more superb stories, including some that differ greatly from the type of tale we associate with Allyn and Howard. But at what they do, these two are the best of our time!

First Place	**"Palace in the Pines" by Doug Allyn**
Second Place	**"The Mask of Peter" by Clark Howard**
Third Place	**"The Leper Colony" by Clark Howard**
Fourth	(tied) "The Blind Pig" by Doug Allyn
	"The Lost Boy" by Robert Barnard
Fifth	"Dear Mr. Holmes" by Steve Hockensmith
Sixth	"Copycat" by Jeffery Deaver
Seventh	(tied) "Valhalla" by Doug Allyn
	"The Orchard of Caged Birds" by Edward D. Hoch
Eighth	(tied) "Take My Word for It and You Don't Have to Answer" by Robert S. Levinson
	"Remodeling" by Kristine Kathryn Rusch
Ninth.	(tied) "A Little Sitdown" by Ed McBain
	"The Chain" by Iain Rowan
Tenth.	"The Lion of the Chama" by David Edgerley Gates

2003 READERS AWARD

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Art by Daniel Galanaugh

LONG-LOST LOVE

by Doug Allyn

The alarm buzzed, ripping into Sharron's dream. Groggy, she groped for the clock, knocking it over. The buzzing stopped. Then started again. Damn. Not the alarm. Telephone. She glanced at the clock as she fumbled the receiver out of its cradle. After midnight? What the hell? Who'd call at this hour?

"H'lo?" She coughed. "Hello?"

"Sharron? Is that you?"

"Who is this?"

"It's me, babe, your long-lost love. Remember me? Remember my voice?"

"Look, I don't know what—" but then she did know. A dream. That's all it was. One sleeping pill too many. She relaxed, closing her eyes. "Sure, I remember you. So, how are things over there?"

"Where?"

"You know, on the other side. Is it all angels and harps?"

"You're not making sense, Shar. You sound stoned. Are you okay?"

"A little buzzed, maybe. I took a pill at ten. Or maybe a couple, I

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don't remember. I've been having trouble sleeping."

"Sorry to call so late, I thought you'd still be up. You always were a night owl. We both were. Morning starts at noon. Remember?"

Sharron remembered. Hadn't thought of it in years. Long, lazy mornings in bed with Bobby. Bobby? But this couldn't be Bobby. Blinking, she started to come out of the haze.

"Babe, I have to go, they're calling my flight. You take care, kiss our little girl for me. I'll call again later."

"Wait—" But he was already gone. Dial tone. Fully awake now, shaken, she stared at the receiver a moment, then carefully replaced it in the cradle. What a crazy dream. She'd definitely have to cut back on the Quaaludes or she'd be seeing yellow submarines next. Maybe wind up in a rubber room again.

Rough as he looks, and tough as the bread-and-butter cases of his private-eye business are, Doug Allyn's Ax Axton is a soft touch for those in distress, and some of his recent cases have had a sentimental cast. The Detroit shamus helps out a former coworker this time, in a case with a dangerous twist. One of Mr. Allyn's stories was your choice for the 2003 Readers Award. See pages 118 and 119.

But . . . God. It seemed so real. The voice and all. Bobby J. How did the old saying go? Dream of the dead, hear from the living? Or was it hear from the dead, dream of . . . No, that didn't make sense. She shook her head, trying to clear it. Then got up.

Pulling on her bathrobe, she tiptoed to the bedroom door, eased it open. Arnold was asleep, breathing quietly, his oxygen cannula in place on his upper lip. She watched him awhile, his face ashen in the pale glow of the night light. Remembering how strong he'd seemed a year ago. Even six months ago. Like a rock. Almost indestructible. And now . . . ? Every labored breath was a struggle.

Easing the door closed, Sharron padded back to bed, still trying to shake off the spell of her dream. A magical midnight phone call. From Bobby Jacks. Her long-lost and very dead love.

Too weird. What on earth brought that on? Probably the pills. She'd been taking too many of them lately. Couldn't get to sleep without them anymore. Knew she was on a downhill slide, heading for deep trouble. But sometimes it seemed like pills were the only friends she had left.

As she reached up to turn off the light, Sharron noticed the telephone number winking in the Caller-ID window. Long distance. Didn't recognize the area code. Heaven? Knowing Bobby, purgatory would be a lot more likely. Or hell.

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Curious now, she tapped the Identify tab. "Unavailable." What the heck did that mean? What kind of phone number was unavailable?

She knew only one way to find out. Didn't care for it much, but . . . Shaking her head at her own foolishness, Sharron tapped Last Number Redial. It rang once, twice, three times. No answer. But as she started to hang up, she heard someone pick up at the other end.

"*Hola?* Hello? Iss anybody there?" A man's voice, but definitely not Bobby. Foreign accent. Hispanic, maybe? "Hello?"

"Look, um . . . " Sharron coughed, unable to speak. "What number have I reached, please?"

"Number?" The foreign voice read it back.

"And . . . where is that?"

"What you mean?"

"The telephone, where is it? Exactly."

"I'm at pay phone. At airport."

Sharron blinked. "In what city?"

"Miami."

Papa Doc's Cajun Bar-B-Q, best baby back ribs in the city of Detroit. Which is saying a lot. Stepping in out of the gusty October afternoon, Sharron paused in the doorway, scanning the diner. Pearl-gray Formica counter with a dozen backless chrome stools, booths along the wall, windows facing 8 Mile, a revolving rack of ribs 'n' chicken sizzling over a glowing bed of coals, scenting the air with a faint haze of hickory smoke, an aroma just south of heaven.

R.B. Axton was sitting in a rear booth, listening to a cell phone. Easy to spot. Ax was the only white face in the place. Hadn't changed much, either. Still dressed like a biker: leather coat, T-shirt, jeans. Half his face marked by road-rash scars. Frankenstein Junior. He glanced up as she approached. A tall blonde, thirtyish, wearing a blazer and designer jeans. A good-looking woman. Fading fast. She slid into the booth, facing him.

"Hi, Ax. Remember me?"

"Later." He closed the cell phone. "Yeah, sure. You're, um . . . Sharron, right? Breckenridge? You were a beer-tender at the Roostertail Club back when I bounced there."

"It's Sharron Wilhite now. I'm married."

"Good for you. I hope."

"I called your office, they said you'd be here. Is it okay for me to . . . ?"

"No problem, I do half my business here. Want something to eat? Food's on the Southern side, great grits, barbecue to die for."

"Another time. I know you used to locate people in the old days,

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to collect money or . . . whatever. Do you still do that kind of thing?"

"Sometimes. The music biz hasn't changed much. People move around, sometimes they forget who they owe. I look 'em up, remind 'em. Politely, for the most part. Why? Does somebody owe you?"

"It's a little more complicated than that. How hard is it to find out whether somebody's actually dead?"

"You can try checking their pulse, but it doesn't always work. If they start getting cold, that's usually a bad sign. Or so I'm told."

"I'm not joking."

"Yeah, I can see that. So what's up, Sharron? Who's dead?"

"I had a boyfriend, six or seven years ago. A soldier. Bobby Jacks. We were pretty serious at the time, even talked about getting married."

"That does sound serious."

"I thought so, too. Until I got pregnant and Bobby shipped out to Panama. A few hot letters, some promises. Then nothing. Not another freaking word. Which was no big surprise. Guys are like that."

"Some guys."

"*Most* guys. Anyway, I figured good riddance. Decided to have the baby without him and get on with my life. But . . . " She swallowed. "My daughter was born with cerebral palsy."

"Wow. I'm sorry. That's a tough break. How's she doing?"

"She's a dream, a great kid. But her medical bills are a killer. I needed help. So I wrote to Bobby again. Even sent him her picture. When he didn't answer, I contacted his outfit. They sent a chaplain around to see me. He told me Bobby was dead. Killed in a training accident in Panama four months earlier. His G.I. life insurance had already been paid to his mother. Nothing the army could do for me. Sorry about that. End of story. Or at least I thought it was. Until Bobby called me last night."

"He called you? The dead guy?"

"Maybe. I'm not sure. It sounded like Bobby, but I'd taken a sleeping pill and I was pretty groggy. It's possible I dreamed the whole thing. Except that there was a number on my Caller ID. When I checked, it turned out to be Miami Airport."

"So somebody called you?"

"Apparently. Maybe it was a wrong number. Or I just heard the phone ring and got it mixed up with a dream somehow."

"But you don't think so?"

"I don't *know,* Ax, and that's a problem. My husband is dying of emphysema, my daughter needs constant care, my stepson hates me so much he's already talking lawsuit over the estate, and now I'm getting phone calls from a damn ghost!" She broke off, glanc-

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ing around. The strain in her voice had drawn a few stares from the counter but they were quickly withdrawn. In Motown, inside 8 Mile, you'd best mind your own business.

"The thing is . . ." She looked away a moment, gathering herself through sheer force of will. "A few years ago I . . . developed a serious drug problem. Pills. Wound up in rehab and almost lost my daughter. I'm already popping downers to sleep. If things get any crazier in my life . . . Look, I need you to settle this for me, Ax. One way or the other. I need to know."

"Okay." He nodded. "I can look into it. Do you have any paperwork on the boyfriend?"

"Only what the army sent me." Fishing an envelope out of her blazer, she passed it to him as she rose to go. "My private number's in there along with two grand. Will that be enough?"

"With any luck it should be way too much. Are you sure you won't have some lunch? The food's terrific here and you look like you could use a square meal. And maybe a friendly ear?"

"Some other time, Ax, I have to get back. Call me as soon as you know anything, okay?"

"Sure. And Sharron? Try to lighten up a little. I know you're going through a real rough patch, but things usually work out."

"Not this time," she said.

A decade ago, tracing a soldier would have taken months, umpty visits to the Federal Building, filling out endless paperwork, and a long, hard climb up the chain of command. The Internet changed all that.

Back in his office, Ax logged on and called up the military-records Web site, U.S. Army. Jacks isn't a common name, and he had no trouble finding Bobby J. Got a copy of the same report Sharron gave him. With one difference.

A message popped up on-screen: "Reason for Inquiry?" He typed "investigation" and added his P.I. license number, hoping it might lead him further in. It didn't. He tried two other tabs for more information—"actual cause of death," "any living relatives." Zip. The same page kept coming up. Sharron was right. According to the army, Bobby Jacks was dead and buried, end of story.

He tried tracking Jacks's family next, the mother listed as next of kin. Dead end, literally. Alma Jacks died two years after her only son, no surviving relatives listed. Ordinarily, tracking skips isn't all that tough. Even if they're trying to hide, they'll usually go somewhere they've been before, and someone will know where that is. Information's like a ball of string. You just need to find the right loose end and pull.

Jacks was different. No loose ends. Not even a ball. All Ax had was one phantom phone call, which might have been a dream.

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Checking with Miami wouldn't help. No witnesses, no records. . . . His cell phone gurgled.

"Ax."

"Mr. R.B. Axton? Axton Investigations?"

"That's right. And you are . . . ?"

"I'm Major Carl Polito, district legal officer for Wayne and Oakland Counties. I believe you just filed an inquiry about a Sergeant Robert Jacks, now deceased."

"Nope, sorry."

"What do you mean, no? According to our records—"

"I mean, no, I don't discuss business with voices over a phone. Do you? Major?"

"Not often. Will you be in your office for the next half-hour, Mr. Axton?"

There were two of them. In dress uniforms. Big and bigger. Major Polito was over six feet, probably pushing three hundred pounds, some of it flab. Master Sergeant Tubbs was half a head taller, same weight but all muscle. Bullet-headed, narrow eyes. Ax's narrow office was barely big enough to hold them. Ax invited them to sit; Tubbs made a point of dusting off the chair before easing down on it, eyeing Ax all the while. A thousand-yard stare. At close range, from a guy his size, it was pretty effective.

"We ran a quick background check on you, Mr. Axton," Polito said, flipping open a manilla folder. "You're not well known to Detroit P.D."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"I meant that you don't seem to do many investigations the police are aware of. Why is that?"

"I mostly do collection work. Skips, bad debts, that kind of thing."

"I expect that ugly mug of yours convinces a lot of folks to pay up," Tubbs said. "What happened to you? Peep in the wrong keyhole?"

"Motorcycle accident. And we just ran out of small talk. What do you guys want?"

"Anytime someone inquires about a fatality—"

"You send two people right over to ask why? I don't think so. Look, you've checked me out; I'm a licensed investigator. Maybe I don't meet the dress code for a regimental tea, but that's your problem, not mine. We're done dancing, guys. Tell me why you're here or hit the door."

"Would you mind telling us why you inquired about Sergeant Jacks?" Polito said, waving Tubbs off.

"I have a client who's interested."

"And that client's name would be . . . ?"

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"Privileged. Last chance. What do you want?"

Polito glanced at Tubbs, who nodded. "Some inquiries about deceased personnel trigger red flags. Especially when the interest seems excessive."

"Meaning somebody else has been inquiring, too? When was that?"

"A few weeks ago. Was it you?"

"Not me, and not my client. This just came up."

"What came up? Exactly?"

Ax hesitated, wondering how much to tell them. What the hey, he had zero anyway. "My client got a phone call."

"From someone asking about Sergeant Jacks, you mean?"

"No, Major, a call *to* my client, *from* the late Sergeant Jacks."

"Damn," Tubbs said softly.

"How certain is your client that it actually was Jacks?" Polito asked.

"Not very. But you don't seem very surprised that a guy who supposedly died in a training accident six years ago is suddenly ringing folks up. Why is that?"

Again the two men exchanged a glance. "It's . . . complicated," Polito said. "Can we talk off the record?"

"Fine by me, unless it conflicts with my client's interests."

"I see no reason why it should. Sergeant Jacks didn't die in a training accident."

"Surprise, surprise. What did happen to him?"

"He was . . . working undercover for the military police. The case involved black-market weapons sales. There was an explosion. Sergeant Jacks was killed."

"Really?" Ax said, chewing it over. "The only problem with that story is that Bobby Jacks wasn't an MP. His MOS was for materiel. So why would a supply sergeant be working undercover for the MPs?"

"You're ex-military?" Tubbs asked. "It's not in your records."

"Marines," Ax said. "Enlisted underage, served most of a hitch in the Corps before they found out how old I was and booted me. But two years in the Marines can be a long damn time. So let me make an educated guess. Since Jacks wasn't a cop, I'm betting he got caught selling arms on the black market. Then the MPs offered him a deal. If he set up his buyers, he could maybe save his own ass. Something like that?"

"Something like it," Polito admitted.

"What went wrong?"

"Jacks arranged to deliver a couple of cases of M16s and five kilos of C-4 explosives. He met the buyers at a deserted warehouse in Colón. The MPs were preparing to move in when there was

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some kind of an explosion. Whole place went up. *Boom!* No survivors."

"Did they identify Bobby Jacks's body?"

"What body?" Tubbs snorted. "Five keys of C-4? The blast flattened half a city block. All they found were bloody grease spots. No way to tell who was what. Nobody could survive a blast like that."

"Doesn't seem like it," Ax agreed. "Do they know what triggered it? C-4 doesn't usually go off by itself."

"No way to be sure. Place was totaled."

"Yeah, I bet it was." Ax nodded.

"And because it was an undercover operation, you can see why we'd prefer to keep it quiet," Polito said, rising. "So if there's nothing else, Mr. Axton . . . ?"

"Just one last question," Ax said. "You said Jacks delivered the goods to a warehouse? So I assume his contacts were supposed to bring enough cash to pay him off, right?"

"Possibly." Polito nodded warily.

"How much are we talking about?"

"We aren't certain of the exact—"

"Ballpark, then. How much money was involved?"

"Roughly two hundred thousand, American," Polito admitted.

"And afterward, how much of that money did you find?"

"In an explosion that horrific—"

"Skip the smoke, Major," Tubbs interrupted. "He's already guessed. We didn't find any money, Axton. Not one damn dime. The investigating officers . . . assumed it was destroyed."

"You mean they hoped it was. Along with Jacks, his pals, and all the incriminating evidence, right? Well, maybe that's exactly what happened. C-4 can erase just about anything, and it definitely makes for a happier ending. Score one for our side, all the bad guys are dead, there's no embarrassing public court-martial for Sergeant Bobby Jacks. Losing the money was a tough break, but what the heck? Nobody said fighting crime was cheap. Case closed, right? Or is it?"

"That depends. You said your client could have been mistaken about the phone call?"

"It's possible, sure. It was late at night and she was groggy."

"Then at this point I doubt we'll do anything more about it. The U.S. Army closed the books on the Jacks incident six years ago, Mr. Axton. We can't reopen it on the basis of a single phone call."

"That's the official line," Tubbs added. "But as one old soldier to another, Mr. Axton, if it turns out that Sergeant Jacks is alive, then he murdered four people for money and got away with it. And not all the dead were bad guys. One was an MP who got caught in the blast. A guy from my outfit, a guy I knew ten years. So if your

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dead sergeant calls again, we'd really like to know about it. Clear?"

"Crystal," Ax said.

Which might have been the end of it. Except that Bobby did call back. Mid afternoon, this time:

"Sharron? Hey, it's me again. You a little more together today?"

"Darned right I am. Look, pal, I don't know what kind of game you think you're playing, but—"

"Roses on snow, Sharron. Do you remember? Roses on snow. . . ."

"What did he mean by that?" Axton asked.

"My breasts, if I recall correctly." Sharron sighed. "It's been a long time." They were in a waiting room at Samaritan Hospital. Shar's daughter was in for neurological tests. She'd taken the call on her cell phone, asked Ax to meet her there.

"Sounds pretty poetic to me," Ax noted. "Is that something Bobby used to say?"

"I'm really not sure. I haven't heard from the guy in seven years and I've heard a whole lot of lines in-between. After my daughter was born, I danced topless for a while, then nude. Anybody with the price of a beer knows exactly what I look like."

"But they'd also have to know about Bobby. How about your husband? Does he know about this . . . long-lost love of yours?"

"Not specifically. I mean, he never asked me for a scorecard and I never offered one. But he knows damned well I wasn't a virgin. And then some. You might as well know it all, Ax. Dancing topless paid a lot better than tending bar, but it still wasn't enough to cover Heather's medical expenses. I had no insurance and couldn't get any. So I, um . . . I started turning tricks. If the customers liked what they saw, the club owner would arrange a private session. Just a few, at first. Then more. A lot more." She looked away, her lip trembling, gathering herself.

"Thing is, I was a lousy hooker. No talent for it. Hated myself, hated what I was doing, cried all the time. Started popping pills just to get through the nights, got hooked on them. Wound up checking into a drug-rehab sanitarium to dry out."

"Does your husband know any of this?"

"All of it," she said with a faint smile. "He was one of my regulars, Ax. One of my johns. Used to buy me once a week for three hundred an hour, a thousand for the night. Regular as clockwork. It was strictly business at first, but after a while we seemed to . . . click, you know? Sometimes we wouldn't even ball. We'd just hold each other. Talk half the night away. He was in the middle of a divorce and my life was a shambles. Four years ago he offered to get me out of it. Made me his mistress. Paid my way through rehab, even got Heather added to his health insurance."

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"With a preexisting condition? How did he manage that?"

"He's a C.P.A., a bookkeeper. He slid me on the payroll of one of the companies he handles for the health coverage. Arnold's a very bright guy, a little older, quiet. Nothing at all like Bobby."

"And you're in love with him, aren't you?" Ax said. It wasn't a question.

"Yeah. I wasn't at first but . . . yes, I am now. Big-time. The whore and the bookkeeper. Go figure, right?"

"You're not a whore, Sharron."

"Not anymore. But I definitely was. Three months ago Arnie asked me to marry him and I did. It wasn't a big romantic gesture; he wanted to make sure his son and ex-wife couldn't muscle me out of his will. He's dying, Ax. Emphysema. He could have less than a year. I don't need any more grief than I've got already. What should I do about this thing with Bobby?"

"That depends. For openers, are you sure it actually is Bobby?"

"No. It's been too long. And anyway, we were just kids back then. It was a fling. Puppy love. Nothing more."

"Maybe he doesn't remember it that way."

"I doubt he'd remember me at all. He was one wild child. Plus, he's dead, remember?"

"Okay then, let's say it isn't Bobby. Who else would know about you two?"

"No one, not anymore. We were over years ago."

"Then how could anybody possibly know enough to impersonate him?"

"I don't know. Unless . . . I did save some of his letters for a while."

"What kind of letters?"

"Love letters. Bobby wrote to me the first few months he was in Panama. Hot stuff, you know? The kind of nonsense kids write. I had those, and the army returned some of the letters I'd written to Bobby. I put them aside in case Heather wanted to read them someday."

"What happened to them?"

"I'm . . . not sure. I kept them in my costume trunk at the strip club. After I got out of rehab, Arnie didn't want me to go back there. He said he'd pick up my things and square my leaving with Jocko."

"Jocko is the club owner?"

"And part-time pimp, part-time loan shark, and all-around gangster. Jocko DeMeo. I was afraid he might be a serious problem. Jocko's a thug and Arnie, well, he's an accountant. But there was no trouble."

"Until now, maybe. What's the name of his club?"

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The Green Door is on a strip off the Cass Corridor with a dozen other joints. Gentlemen's clubs. Adult entertainment. Neon signs have replaced the old red-light district, but the business is basically the same. Dancers in G-strings, watered booze, football, basketball, and NASCAR races on big-screen TVs. What "gentleman" could resist all that?

Late afternoon, the main room was a third full: two bars, a hundred tables, nude dancers gyrating on the runways, TVs winking soundlessly from every corner, air hazy with cigar smoke. Motown has a no-smoking ordinance, but the point was moot in The Green Door. Lung cancer isn't the worst bug you can catch in a joint like this.

Ax took a seat at the bar, asked for Jocko. A minute later, a bouncer was at his shoulder: huge white guy, six and a half feet, three hundred and fifty pounds encased in a black muscle T-shirt and slacks. Shaved head. Jailhouse tattoos. Serious iron-pumper. Arms the size of Axton's legs.

"You the guy askin' to see Jocko?" The bouncer leaned in close, crowding him.

"That's right."

"About?"

"About two minutes. Lead the way." Ax rose, backing the big man up, the two of them only inches apart, eye to eye, a cone of silence in the noisy room. The bouncer towered over Ax, who didn't seem to mind. Which confused the big guy. He was used to spooking people with his bulk alone. And in the strong-arm business, when intimidation doesn't work, you'd best wonder why. The bouncer turned and stalked off without a word, Ax trailing a step behind.

Side door. Soundproof corridor paneled in dark walnut. Office at the end of the hall. The bouncer turned to face Ax, who opened his coat to show he wasn't packing. The bouncer considered frisking him. Then read his eyes. Decided against it. Opened the door instead.

Small office, big desk facing a solid wall of black-and-white TV monitors with views of the club and parking lot. Jocko was dressed pimp-casual, Honolulu-blue Detroit Lions jacket over a golf shirt. Gold chains, gold rings. Hair dyed Elvis-black, frizzed to cover a bald spot. It didn't quite make it.

Nobody offered to shake hands.

"I know who you are," Jocko said. "Axton. Ax, right? You do collections and you're supposed to be pretty good. Only I don't owe anybody and I do my own collecting. So what are you doing here?"

"It's not about money. A few years back you had a girl working for you. Sharron Breckenridge? She left a costume trunk behind. Where would it be?"

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"A trunk? You're wasting my time about a freakin' costume trunk? Do I look like a bellhop to you?"

"Not really. You look more like a guy who keeps track of things. Maybe even a trunk."

"Wrong! I don't know squat about no trunk and I don't remember your girlfriend, Cheryl what's-her-name—"

"Breckenridge. Only it's Sharron Wilhite now. And she's not my girlfriend."

Jocko blinked. Then swallowed. Hard. "Whoa," he said, raising one hand. "Wilhite? Sharron Wilhite? Why didn't you say so?"

"I just did. What's the problem?"

"Look, Axton, how about we back this up and start over again? I know what I'm supposed to say if anybody asks me about Sharron. She never worked here. I never even heard of her. Sorry. I just didn't recognize her old name. It won't happen again. Okay?"

Ax nodded. Had no idea what had tripped Jocko's trigger, but something definitely had. He'd gone fish-belly pale under his sunlamp tan.

"Now, about this . . . trunk you wanted? Mr. Wilhite's people collected Sharron's things a few years ago. I don't know what they took. I didn't want to know."

"Mr. Wilhite's people?"

"You know, goons from the union. You're welcome to check the storeroom or anyplace else you want, but I'm pretty sure those guys took everything."

"The union guys, you mean."

"Right. Trash haulers, Teamsters, I don't know which union it was. Like I said, I didn't ask. If something got lost along the way, I don't know nothing about that, but you can tell Mr. Wilhite I'll make it right, whatever it was. I don't want no trouble. Anything you guys need, you've got it. No charge. On the house. Anything at all."

"We'll let you know," Ax said.

In The Green Door parking lot, Ax climbed into his battered Camaro. Didn't fire it up, though. Sat behind the wheel awhile instead. Thinking.

Jocko was a greedy sleazebag, ready for any scam on the planet. But he wasn't involved in this one. Too scared. And rightly so. If Arnold Wilhite worked for the right unions, even as a bookkeeper, he had serious juice. Some Motown unions are mobbed up, some aren't, but trying to sort them out can get you killed. Ask Jimmy Hoffa. Jocko knew the score, knew how bad things could turn out for him. So he wasn't trying to hustle anything out of Sharron Wilhite. He simply wouldn't dare.

So who would?

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Bobby Jacks might, if he was still alive. But why would he risk coming out of hiding after all this time? For his one-time lover, Sharron, and her disabled kid? After six years? Didn't seem likely. Murdering four people for money would take a ton of guts and no heart at all. Ax didn't know doodly about long-lost love, but Bobby J didn't sound like much of a candidate for it.

So. If this wasn't about love, that only left money. Extortion? Possibly. The problem was, Sharron's husband already knew about her past. Hell, he was part of it. Not blackmail, then. That only left the money Sharron had coming. The money in her husband's estate.

Ax called Sharron on her cell.

"Your former pal Jocko says your husband sent some people around to collect your trunk a few years ago. I believe him. Any idea where it might be now?"

"If Arnold had it picked up, then it's probably at the house, maybe in the attic. I was in rehab at the time; I don't recall seeing it."

"Who else might know it was there?"

"I don't know. The maid, I suppose. Possibly my stepson."

"This would be the kid who's threatening to sue you over your husband's estate?"

"He's not exactly a kid, Ax. Roger's twenty-five."

"And where would he be now?"

"Probably at school. He lives on campus at the University of Detroit. He's a sophomore."

"Twenty-five's a bit old for a sophomore, isn't it?"

"Roger's . . . still finding himself."

"I'm pretty fair at finding people," Ax said. "Maybe I can give him a hand."

The Quadrangle at U of D was jammed, a thousand-plus kids sharing tables, studying, batting the breeze, sipping Starbucks, or scarfing fast food from the booths that ringed the room. An incredible din. Teenybop voices and laughter from the tiled floors and walls, a Grand Canyon of noise.

Ax was a bit older than the average, but fitting in was no problem. Amid the sea of tattoos, dyed hair, and pierced faces, Axton's scars and leather jacket seemed almost ordinary. Ax didn't bother going through official channels to locate Roger Wilhite. Simply went from table to table asking for him until someone pointed him out.

Roger Wilhite was at a corner table with a much younger friend, sipping latte, discussing some class or other. Wilhite looked more like a grad student than a sophomore, a squared-off five-six or

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seven, two hundred pounds. Dark full beard that camouflaged a weak chin.

Ax pulled up a chair without asking. Up close and personal, his size and scarred face intimidated most people. Not young Roger.

"You're new," Wilhite said calmly. "I assume you work for my father?"

"Not exactly. Can we talk? Alone?"

Roger dismissed his pal with a wave of his hand. "Before you even start, if you're hoping to get a message to my dad through me, save your breath. My father and I don't talk. I rarely see him these days."

"Actually, you're the one I came to see, sonny. About some letters."

"Ah. The famous billets-doux."

"The what?"

"Love letters." Roger sniffed. "So he finally confronted her about them. I was beginning to think he didn't have the guts."

"Confronted her?"

"About the letters. Sharron only married him for his money and now he damned well knows it. He's just a meal ticket for her and that sickly brat."

"But Sharron was just a kid when they wrote those letters, why would your dad think . . . ?"

Roger eyed him with a bland smirk. Ax nearly slapped it off his face.

"Ah. Your dad never saw the originals, did he? You did a little creative editing, maybe changed a few dates, punched them up a little? Something like that?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Sure you do, sonny. I'd skip politics as a career choice. You don't lie worth a damn."

"How it happened doesn't matter. The bottom line is, my father knows the truth now."

"Your truth, maybe. But you don't know the half of it." Ax rose, leaning over Roger.

"Give up on the letters, junior. And knock off the phone calls, too. Sharron and your dad have a plateful of problems already. If you make any more trouble for them, I'll be back. And you *don't* want to see me again. Ever. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

Roger tried to meet Ax's stare but couldn't hold it. He looked away, swallowing. Maybe he was smarter than he looked.

"I'll take that as a yes," Ax said. "Glad we had this little talk. Take care."

Ax was halfway across the Quadrangle when Roger called after him. "Hey! You're going to be sorry you came here."

"I'm sorry already."

"And I don't know about any phone calls."

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Ax didn't even look back.

But he thought about it as he walked through the U of D parking ramp to his car. Sharron said her midnight caller sounded like Bobby J. And it didn't matter how many letters Roger found or how clever he was at forging new ones. There was no way he could fake Bobby's voice. He simply couldn't have.

Because he'd never heard it.

Fishing his cell phone out of his jacket, Ax rang up Sharron Wilhite.

"Hey, it's your long-lost bouncer. We need to talk."

Grosse Pointe, a posh Motown suburb named by French voyagers who'd be arrested for vagrancy if they set foot in the place today. Magnificent mini-mansions with multiplex garages and lawns long enough for polo, guarded by steel fences and a private army of rent-a-cops.

The Dodge auto heirs live here, a few of the Fords, Arab oil sheiks, a dozen dot-com millionaires, and even a televangelist or two.

Plus at least one anonymous union bookkeeper.

The Wilhite home was a gray Gothic Revival box, three stories with a full-width porch, a long brick driveway, and a gorgeous view of Lake St. Clair.

Parking in front, Ax trotted up the steps. The ornately carved front door opened before he could ring the bell. But it wasn't Sharron. A big guy, tan trench coat, bleached brush-cut, ice-blue eyes. And a polar smile. Roddy Rothstein. Rented muscle, the absolute top of the line. Damn.

"Hey, Ax, how you been?"

"Ducky. Until now. What are you doing here?"

Roddy didn't bother to answer. Didn't have to. They were in the same business, but Roddy worked a tougher side of the street. Ax opened his coat to show he was unarmed but Roddy didn't buy it. He frisked him anyway, found the hideaway Glock 9 Ax carried in the small of his back.

"Is that the whole show?"

"A blade in my boot."

"I spotted it." Roddy smiled. "Man, you're such a Neanderthal. I'd cap you five times before you could pull that pig sticker. Wanna try for it?"

"No bet."

"Maybe another time. Let's go."

Roddy led him up the carpeted staircase to a second-floor bedroom, pushed him in. A bear of a man lay in the bed, propped up by a wall of pillows, with an oxygen cannula attached to his nasal septum to help him breathe. Ashen, balding, he looked half dead. Until you met his eyes. Gray as granite and just as hard.

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A second man was seated against the wall. Rangy, with dark hair, deep tan, turquoise sport coat, deck shoes, no socks. Looked streetwise, but Ax didn't recognize him.

Roddy ushered Ax to the bedside. "This is Axton, Mr. Wilhite. Ax. If he's got a first name, I never heard it."

"R.B. Initials only," Wilhite said quietly, his voice barely above a whisper. "A Southern quirk, initials. I'm not a well man, Mr. Axton. I don't have much time, and none at all to waste on you. I won't ask you anything twice. Do we understand each other?"

Ax nodded.

"When a man like you visits my son, I want to know why. Who are you working for?"

"Your wife. Sharron's been getting some crank calls, supposedly from an old boyfriend. She asked me to look into it."

"And if you find the boyfriend? Are you supposed to run him off? Or fix them up?"

"You'll have to ask Sharron about that."

"I'm asking you. Or would you rather have Roddy ask you? As many times as it takes?"

Ax considered trying to dummy up. Decided against it. Roddy could beat him half to death without breaking a sweat. And Wilhite's eyes said it all. The man in the bed had nothing to lose.

"The ex-boyfriend is supposed to be dead. Sharron wants the phone calls cleared up, one way or the other. That's it."

"And what have you learned so far?"

"I think your son found some letters from Sharron to her old boyfriend in a costume trunk. He altered the dates to make them seem current, then passed them along to you. The letters don't mean a thing, Mr. Wilhite. They were written years ago."

"I'm a C.P.A., Mr. Axton. I spot forgeries for a living. My son Roger is strictly amateur talent. On the other hand, I have no illusions about my relationship with Sharron. We've always been . . . very businesslike. She's a realist. So am I. Perhaps it's the reason we get along so well. Still, the letters revealed a side of her I didn't know existed, a depth of passion that . . ." Wilhite broke off, closing his eyes, breathing deeply to conserve his strength.

"Sweet Jesus," Ax said softly. "You tracked him down, didn't you? Bobby Jacks. Sharron's long-lost love." Turquoise blazer stiffened in his chair. Ax turned to look him over. Noticed the surgical scars this time, faint traces along the hairline. "So you're the famous Bobby J?"

He didn't answer. It didn't matter.

"The army's been looking for this guy for years, Mr. Wilhite. How did you find him?"

"Mr. Wilhite has contacts the government never dreamed of," Roddy offered. "Union muscle, mobsters, Teamsters, he knows everybody that . . ." Roddy's voice trailed off as Sharron stepped

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quietly into the room. She eyed Bobby Jacks for what seemed a very long moment. An unreadable look. Then she crossed to her husband's bedside.

"If you're going to discuss my life with strangers, Arnie, at least have the courtesy to turn off your damned room monitor." She snatched up the device, clenching it as tightly as her temper.

"It's been a long time, babe," Bobby J said, moving up beside her, bussing her lightly on the cheek.

"A couple of lifetimes," she agreed, facing him, taking stock. "You look even better than I remembered, Bobby. Almost too good. If we passed on the street I don't think I'd know you. Plastic surgery?"

"A little touch-up," he admitted. "Just a precaution. Business, not pleasure. I thought I looked pretty good before. You, on the other hand, look as fine as ever."

"Don't try to snow me, Bobby, I look like crap. Feel like it, too. Haven't slept in weeks. My husband's dying, you see. And at a time when we should be sharing every moment we can get, he's been running this incredible scam behind my back. I knew you were a genius with numbers, Arnie. I had no idea you could actually raise the dead."

"I can't, Sharron. Nobody can. That's the problem."

"What problem?"

"Marrying you was a mistake."

"In what way?"

"I thought I could provide for you after I'm gone. The doctors promised I had at least a year. But they were . . . mistaken. The latest tests . . . We don't have a year, Sharron. We might have a few months. Maybe less."

"What? My God, Arnie—"

"I'm sorry, I know I should have told you, but please don't come unglued on me now. Please." He paused, taking rapid, shallow breaths. Pulling himself together by sheer force of will.

"The point is that any arrangements we make now are going to look suspicious. People will think I was losing it at the end and you tricked me, coerced me, whatever. My son and my ex-wife will sue to have any new will thrown out. And I'm afraid your . . . past makes you an easy target."

"I don't care what they think. And I'm not afraid of a fight."

"But you should be," Ax said quietly. "What Arnie's trying to tell you is that the people he works for—the unions, the mob—won't risk any court fight that might draw attention to their business. They'll solve the problem by making you disappear. Permanently. They're good at it."

"And where does Bobby J come in to all this?"

"When Roger gave me the letters, I had Bobby checked out," Wilhite whispered. "We found out he was on the run. And I realized

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finding him could solve both problems."

"How?"

"You cared for him once, a lot. The letters proved that. And he's the father of your child. He's also clever, smart enough to disappear and stay gone. With enough money, the two of you could go away, start over—"

"—and live happily ever after?" Sharron said acidly. "Is that what you think? Well, maybe it's not such a far-fetched idea. Bobby was the first boy I seriously fell for, and he looks better now than he did then. But I've got a news flash for you, Arnie. When you're gone, I don't expect to be happy again for a long, long time. Maybe never. So if you think marrying me was a mistake, I'm sorry. It meant a lot to me. But not because of your will. We've always been straight with each other, Arnie, let's not stop now. Because I was a whore when you met me, way down deep you probably still wonder if I'm only with you for the money. Well, maybe that was true. Once. It's not anymore. Thank you for finding my long-lost love. He's one hell of a valentine. But I'm not going off with him, now or ever. You're the one, Arnie. You're stuck with me for as much time as we have. Get used to it. As for the money, don't worry about it. I'll be all right."

"But afterward, you'll have nothing."

"Wrong, I'll have Heather and she'll have me. The rest I'll manage on my own."

"How?" Bobby sneered. "On your back?"

"Watch your mouth," Ax snapped.

"Screw that," Bobby J said. "Look, if this bimbo wants to walk away broke, that's her lookout, but what about me? When your people found me they promised me money, Mr. Wilhite, serious money and a new life."

"And your long-lost family," Sharron added dryly. "Or have you forgotten that part already?"

"Of course not, but—"

"I'll make things right with you, Mr. Jacks," Arnie whispered. "You'll be no worse off than before."

"Dammit, that's not good enough!" Bobby snarled, grabbing Sharron's arm, yanking her into a choke hold. "I took a big risk by coming here, pal! Too many people know about me now. I want a helluva lot more than airfare and a brush-off!"

Roddy and Ax moved together like a machine, starting toward Bobby from opposite sides.

"Stop right there! I'll snap her damned neck!"

"No you won't," Roddy said grimly, coming on. "You're smart. Think what'll happen to you one second after."

Bobby didn't get the chance. Ax was already on him, hooking a body shot below his rib cage, doubling him over. As Roddy pulled

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Sharron to safety, Ax hammered Jacks down with a pile-driver cross, catching him flush on the jaw, dropping him like a rock. Jacks didn't move. Didn't even twitch.

Jerking an automatic from his shoulder holster, Roddy jammed the muzzle against Bobby's temple. Ax grabbed his wrist.

"Whoa. He's down. No need for that."

"It's not up to you, sport. Mr. Wilhite?"

"Not now," Wilhite whispered. "We've trouble enough."

"With a lot more on the way," Ax said. "Especially for Sharron. You'd better tell her the rest of it."

"The rest of what? What are you talking about?" Sharron asked.

"Finding Bobby wasn't just a romantic gesture, Shar. He was your last chance. Arnie's boy and his ex aren't the only ones who'll question his judgment. His bosses will too. They'll wonder how shaky his grip was at the end. And what he might have told you."

"He's never told me anything!"

"They don't know that, and they hate loose ends. They won't harm you while he's alive. Can't afford to tick him off. But afterward, they may decide to close the books on you just to be sure. That's the real reason Arnie hoped you'd go away with Bobby, if not for love, then for money. Helluva plan. Only the lady wants to stand by you, Mr. Wilhite, no matter what. And if you truly care about her, you only have one way left to go now. And you already know what that is."

"Whoa, wait a minute," Roddy said, getting it. "I didn't sign on for this kinda heat."

"What heat?" Sharron asked. "Arnie, what's going on?"

"If you stay, the only way your husband can keep you safe is to roll," Roddy said. "Tell the Feds everything he knows and take his bosses down before they get to you. That's why he hired me instead of using mob goons. If they knew he was even thinking about rolling over, you'd both be dead already."

"Arnie?" Sharron asked, taking his hand.

"He's right," Wilhite whispered. "It's the only way now."

"You mean . . . Witness Protection or something? But you'll lose everything you have."

"What happens to me doesn't make much difference now."

"It does to me. But if this is what we have to do, count me in. I won't miss much about my old life. Definitely not my long-lost love."

"What do you want us to do with him, Mr. Wilhite?" Roddy asked.

"Sharron?" Wilhite asked, reading her eyes.

"I don't want him hurt. But I don't want my daughter to know what he turned out to be, either."

"The army has him listed as a hero, missing in action," Ax offered. "They don't want publicity. If they can put Jacks in a

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stockade, where he belongs, I can cut a deal to leave his records alone. He can go back to being your long-lost love."

"No," Sharron said, easing down gently on the edge of Arnie's bed. "Not anymore. That slot's already taken."

"I know a place," Roddy said as he and Ax perp-walked Bobby J out to Roddy's Cadillac. "An abandoned warehouse in Ecorse. Tell the army they can pick lover-boy up there, but do it quick. I won't hang around to babysit him."

"You gonna split?"

"Damn straight. When Wilhite talks to the Feds it's gonna land like a bomb on the six-o'clock news, Ax. I wanna be long gone when it does. You'd best do the same."

"I can work down South awhile. How long do you think?"

"A few months. After that, the mob's gonna be way too busy to worry about us."

"You hope," Ax said.

"We'll be okay. We don't matter enough. We'll be like Sharron's long-lost lover here. We'll just fade out of the picture."

Or not, Ax thought on the drive over to the Federal Building to cut a deal with the army. Bobby Jacks might disappear into Leavenworth or wherever, but Sharron would never forget him. Not completely.

Most of us have a long-lost love or two locked away in the dusty cupboards of our memories. Heartthrobs from high school or the dating game. Dream lovers.

Every once in a while we take them out, dust 'em off, and wonder. What if? What might have been?

But in our hearts we already know the answer. There's a simple reason our long-losts are only memories. Because the love didn't last.

And the real thing does.

It's so rare it only comes once or twice in a lifetime. Ax had never met it at all. But he knew Sharron had, and not with any long-lost dreamboat.

For her, it was the man in the bed. Her dying bookkeeper. Despite all their baggage, or maybe because of it, they were a match. The real thing.

They didn't have much time; the clock was already running out for them. Soon, Arnie would unleash the whirlwind and their lives wouldn't be their own anymore.

And afterward, Sharron would have to find a way to go on alone. Without him. With only her sickly daughter and a few memories of a long-lost love. A real one.

In a way, it was almost funny. Despite the tidal wave of trouble Sharron had coming, Ax couldn't help envying her a little.

Hell, he envied both of them. ●

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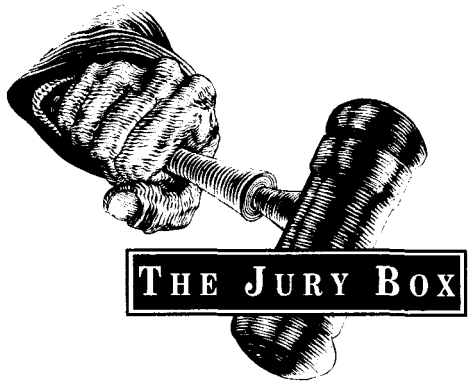

by Jon L. Breen

As the Mystery Writers of America's annual Edgar Allan Poe Awards approach, consider a new novel from a multiple winner of the fan-voted Anthony, Agatha, and Macavity mystery awards who has never even been nominated for the peer-juried Edgar; a new collection by the writer whose denial of a Grand Master Award in his lifetime is one of Edgar's most notable oversights; a new collection by another non-winner who has, however, been nominated five times in three different categories; and (in the biggest surprise of all) the first mystery novel in 45 years by the very first Edgar winner.

**** Carolyn Hart: *Letter From Home,* Berkley, $22.95. In 1944, 14-year-old Gretchen Gilman gets a summer job on her small-town Oklahoma paper and winds up reporting on the murder of a friend's mother. Was Faye Tatum a goodtime girl who cheated on her recently furloughed G.I. husband, or did she hang out at a locally notorious nightspot because she loved to dance? Evoking the town, its people, and the problems and attitudes of the World War II home front beautifully while constructing a deceptive but fairly clued mystery, this is by far the best novel I've read by Hart. As I write, the nominations for best of 2003 haven't yet been announced, but I wouldn't be surprised if this book nabbed her first Edgar.

**** Cornell Woolrich: *Night and Fear: A Centenary Collection,* edited and with an introduction by Francis M. Nevins; Carroll & Graf/Penzler, $26. According to the MWA Web site, Woolrich was awarded an Edgar for the 1949 film *The Window,* adapted for the screen from his 1947 story "The Boy Cried Murder" by Mel Dinelli. The well-deserved Grand Master, however, eluded him. Amazingly, there are still enough previously uncollected stories by the master of noirish suspense to make up a first-rate

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volume. Most of the fourteen gathered here first appeared in pulp magazines of the late 1930s and early '40s and were reprinted in *EQMM* in the '40s and '50s. Editor Nevins, himself a double Edgar winner for books on Woolrich and Ellery Queen, packs a remarkable amount of information and analysis into his 18-page introduction and the individual post-story notes.

*** John Mortimer: *Rumpole and the Primrose Path,* Viking, $24.95. The title story was an Edgar nominee for best short story of 2002, and its distinguished author was previously nominated three times for Rumpole TV episodes and once for his script for the 1965 film *Bunny Lake is Missing,* adapted from the novel by Evelyn Piper. On point of death in the last tale of *Rumpole Rests His Case,* the aged Old Bailey barrister again rises like a Phoenix, making a daring nighttime escape from his (final?) rest home to take on new cases and new Chambers politics. The title story and the finishing "Rumpole Redeemed" are unusual in their failure to get into court, but the other four see the barrister in action defending a member of the Timson crime family on a pickpocketing charge ("New Year's Resolutions"), a senior police officer accused of conspiracy to murder ("Scales of Justice"), a newspaper publisher sued for breach of confidence ("Right to Privacy"), and a street preacher charged with a lap dancer's murder ("Vanishing Juror").

*** Julius Fast: *A Trunkfull of Trouble,* Gryphon, $20. Fast, who won the first Edgar, awarded for his 1946 military mystery *Watchful at Night,* and more recently has been best known for the nonfiction best-seller *Body Language* and its sequels, returns to crime fiction in a world of computers, cell phones, and nose studs. The opening situation (a mobster's bodyguard misunderstands his instructions and puts a battered but living victim in the wrong sort of trunk) suggests a Westlakian criminous farce, and the final suspense situation might have appealed to Woolrich or Hitchcock, but Fast finally resembles none of these, bringing his own humorously optimistic and romantic worldview to the proceedings. The trade paperback's handsome design imitates the classic Dell Mapbacks of the 1940s.

Mike Ashley, who won an Edgar for his 2002 reference book *The Mammoth Encyclopedia of Modern Crime Fiction,* is best known as a prolific anthologist. His latest is *The Mammoth Book of Roman Whodunnits* (Carroll & Graf, $11.95), including in its generous 526 pages both an introduction and a strong new Gordianus the Finder story ("A Gladiator Dies Only Once") from Steven Saylor (who won the MWA's 1993 Robert L. Fish Award but has unaccountably had no Edgar nods), plus good new cases for

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such other ancient sleuths as John Maddox Roberts's Decius Metellus (1991 Best Paperback Original nominee) and Marilyn Todd's Claudia Seferius.

Two of the most important reference sources in mystery fiction (both recipients of special Edgars in earlier incarnations) are available from Locus Press (Box 13305, Oakland, CA 94661) in new CD-ROM editions that carry their coverage through the end of the 20th Century: Allen J. Hubin's *Crime Fiction IV: A Comprehensive Bibliography 1749-2000* ($49.95) and Walter Albert's *Detective and Mystery Fiction: An International Bibliography of Secondary Sources,* Third Edition ($29.95). The indispensable Hubin bibliography is also published in a print edition of five folio volumes (The Battered Silicon Dispatch Box, Box 204, Shelburne, Ontario, Canada L0N 1S0; $400).

Hubin, who has made a greater contribution to mystery scholarship in the past 35 years than any other individual, swears the latest edition will be the last, at least compiled by him, but he is already offering addenda to it in a recently revived fanzine that has been published off and on since 1974. Beginning with issue #40 (December 2003), *Mystery*File* will be published about eight times a year ($3.50 each or $13 for four issues) by Steve Lewis, 62 Chestnut Rd., Newington, CT 06111. The editor, who used to review mysteries for the Hartford *Courant,* is one of the best critics around, and his other contributors include both Hubin and Albert plus such well-known names as 1977 biographical/critical Edgar-winner Marvin Lachman, Richard Moore, Bill Crider, and Dan Stumpf. In its coverage of mysteries of the past as well as the contemporary scene, Lewis's no-frills journal may prove the closest present-day American equivalent to Hubin's early *Armchair Detective* and Geoff Bradley's long-running British journal, *CADS.*

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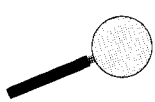

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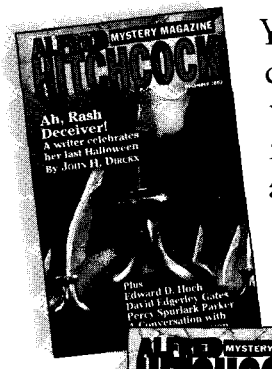

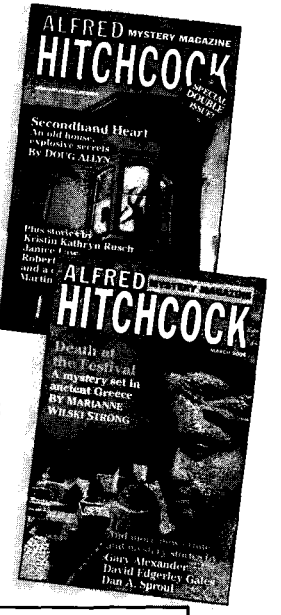

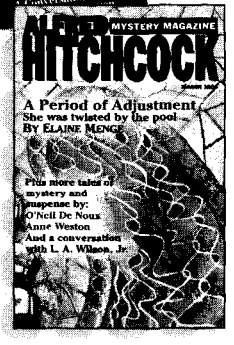
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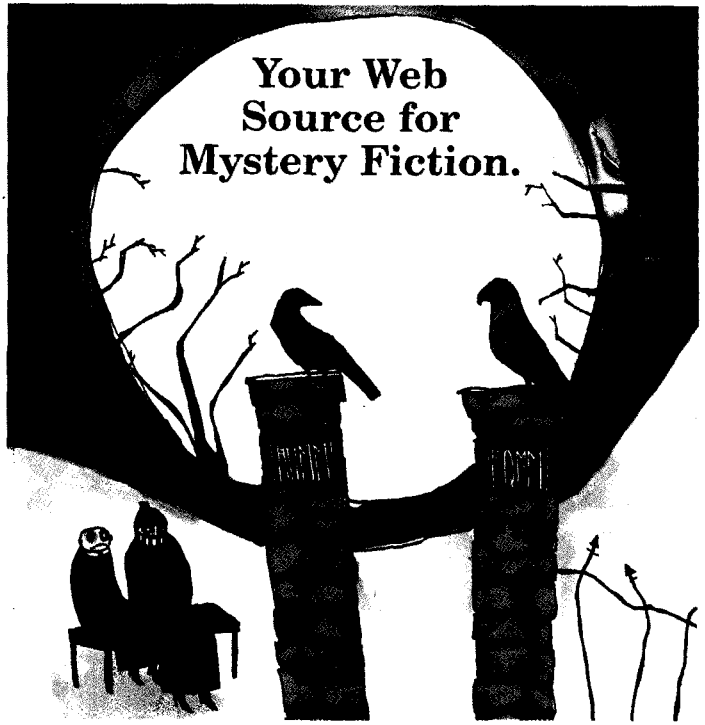

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